PENGUIN CLASSICS

Tales of the German Imagination

from the Brothers Grimm to Ingeborg Bachmann

Selected and translated by PETER WORTSMAN

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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TALES OF THE GERMAN IMAGINATION FROM THE BROTHERS GRIMM TO INGEBORG BACHMANN

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To Richard Sieburth, il miglior fabbro

Introduction
‘Making Bones Sing’

‘Perhaps there are also different ways of writing, but I only know this one; at night, when fear keeps me from sleeping, I only know this one […]’ So Franz Kafka confided to his friend Max Brod in a letter of 1922. Or as Jorge Luis Borges aptly observed: ‘Kafka could only dream nightmares, which he knew that reality endlessly supplies.’[1]

Fear has indeed proven rich fodder for fantasy in the German storytelling tradition, at least as far back as the Romantics. The very notion of angst has been absorbed into the English language by its German name, as if we English speakers conceded the terrifying as Teutonic turf. Fearless in their readiness to face fear head-on, certain *Dichter*[2] mined their nightmares for precious literary ore. But if the resulting narratives succeeded in transcending the German particular and managed to tap the collective unconscious, appealing to readers across the divides of language, temperament, time and space, something more than just morbidity must be at play. Contrary to the cliché, the darkest German literary confections are such a pleasure to read because they are also spiked with humour – therein lies their enduring appeal, eliciting laughter when you least expect it and in the most unlikely places.

Perusing the offerings at a bookstore in East Berlin a few years before the Wall came down, I was amazed at the apparent profusion of literature and the crowd of would-be book buyers. Not just the collected works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and V. I. Lenin, as I’d naively expected. Books were clearly still a prized commodity in the German Democratic Republic. Word spread far in advance of the appearance of new editions, and because of the price of paper and limited print runs, books sold like hot cakes, often disappearing as quickly as they hit the shelves. It was here in East Berlin that I first happened upon a copy of *Café Klößchen, 38 Grotesken*,[3] a book rife with gallows humour from a host of irreverent German authors of the twenties and thirties I’d never heard of, Klabund, Lichtenstein, Mynona, Kisch, et al. – one of the sources of the stories in this volume.

And, much to my surprise, the GDR even countenanced Kafka. I was flabbergasted to spot his name out of the corner of my eye on the spine of a book. But the irony was too good, too Kafkaesque to be true: for the title I had at first squint read as *Sämtliche Schriften* (*Complete Writings*) turned out on closer examination to be *Amtliche Schriften* (*Administrative Writings*), a compendium, not

of his elusive parables, but of the official reports and letters he drafted on the job for the insurance company, the bureaucratic taskmaster to which he sacrificed his daylight hours and which he cursed in his diaries and letters to friends at night.

'Yes,' an unsmiling, bespectacled clerk said, 'other works by the author have been published.'

'Can I buy them?' I asked.

'No,' she regretted to inform me, 'they are out of print.'

An absurd situation straight out of *The Trial*! Kafka himself would have got a kick out of it. I remembered what my late beloved Aunt Steffi, a native of Vienna, once said of a Kafka reading she'd attended in her youth.

'What was he like?!' I pressed her.

She paused. A rationalist to the bone, Steffi had to admit that she did not know what to make of the gawky man and his strange stories. 'But one thing I do remember,' she said, 'he could hardly keep from laughing.'

By a fortuitous conjoining of literary taste, popular Zeitgeist and publishing fashion in the wake of the Second World War, and thanks to the tireless machinations of his friend and impassioned posthumous promoter, Max Brod, Kafka's dark premonitions broke through the bulwarks of culture, language, time and place to make the author a catchword, a one-man symbol of our angst-ridden age, a secular saint of the twentieth century. In 1984, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris presented an unprecedented exhibition, titled 'Le Siècle de Kafka' (Kafka's Century). It was perhaps the first time that a major public exhibition space devoted to the visual and plastic arts launched a show ostensibly revolving around the work of a literary artist. Kafka served as a curatorial clothes-line on which to hang a diverse body of artworks and artefacts, including sculpture by Alberto Giacometti, Louise Nevelson, Germaine Richier, a wrapped-up armless torso by Christo, drawings by Paul Klee, Alfred Kubin, Max Ernst and Henri Michaux, photos of a haunted Prague, doodles by Kafka himself and a sentimental novel by a certain Dr Josef Goebbels, better known for his rants and ravings. The conceptual clothes-peg that held the exhibition together was the metamorphosis of the proper noun Kafka into the adjective Kafkaesque.

In our justifiable adulation of the writings of the visionary German-speaking Jewish scribe from Prague we tend to overlook the fact that he was not spontaneously spawned, Athena-like, from the cranium of German letters. Kafka had his precursors among the German Romantics, as well as his contemporaries working in kindred veins, writers of talent, imagination and stylistic daring scribbling away in Berne, Berlin, Vienna and the far corners of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And if Kafka's dark fantasies resonated with readers in the English-speaking world, it is not only because they spoke to the existential angst of the moment. The path had already been paved by Carroll and Wilde, Kipling, Wells and Orwell – an author whose name inspired an almost synonymous adjective, Orwellian. The American imagination, meanwhile, had already been primed by home-grown fabulists, Irving, Hawthorne and Poe, whose inspiration had

been stoked by Hoffmann, von Eichendorff and Tieck (translations of whose works were serialized in *Blackwood's* magazine, a well-respected review in its day).

Darkness is not, of course, a German prerogative. But the German imagination set an early standard, poignantly and precisely sounding the sinister in the flights of fancy of E. T. A. Hoffmann and the tales collected and retold by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm. Anyone who in childhood has ever read, or rather been read, a Grimms' *Märchen* will for ever remember the effect: that terror combined with the immediate recognition that such tales tap otherwise unutterable truths. (Until the end of his short life, Kafka still savoured *Märchen*, unquestionably a major influence on the form and content of his own enigmatic short prose.) The standard English translation of the German word *Märchen* as fairy tale sugarcoats the raw German grit with hovering fairies and flickering lights, replacing the cunning, cannibalistic witch of 'Hansel and Gretel' with the cute and kindly Tinkerbell, tapping, but ultimately quelling, fledgling fears. Disney added another layer of prettification, safely encapsulating the malevolent in a shell of nicety. But German *Märchen* aren't nice. Rather than cocoon the virgin consciousness, they blurt out the unspeakable, and so, from early on, vaccinate with the ring of truth. ('A New Kind of Plaything' by Mynona and 'The Experiment or the Victory of the Children' by Unica Zürn, two of the twentieth-century German fables included in this volume, are directly rooted in and toy with the Grimms' aesthetic. And Ingeborg Bachmann's 'The Secrets of the Princess of Kagran' taps the same source.)

In 'The Singing Bone', one of the Brothers' lesser-known, albeit most telling tales, a wandering shepherd-cum-minstrel stumbles on a little white bone, out of which he carves a mouthpiece for his horn. But the bone has its own agenda:

> Oh, dear little shepherd boy,
> The bone you blow on knows no joy,
> My brother slay me.
> Beneath the bridge he laid me
> All for the wild boar's hide
> To make the king's daughter his bride.

No mere accommodating object, this, no mouthpiece for an idle ditty – the bone cannot help but echo the smothered cries of the misdeed. The shepherd's breath, like an archaeologist's glue, *re*-members the dismembered. (In 'The Onion', an anti-*Märchen* included here, the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, best known for his visual collages, reconstitutes another kind of re-membering.)

The Grimms, it turns out, albeit unbeknownst to them, had a prehistoric prototype. In 2009 archaeologists from the University of Tübingen digging in the Hohle Fels Cave, in south-west Germany, not far from Ulm, reported their discovery of a 35,000-year-old, 8.5-inch-long, five-holed flute carved out of the hollow bone of a griffon vulture.[4] It is only fitting that a bone flute, a singing bone of the sort immortalized by the Grimms, should have been discovered, not in a riverbed in broad daylight, but in the dark pit of a cave where it was surely played by its maker to tame the restless spirits and still the fears of night.

This anthology gathers German imaginative texts from a span of several centuries and from various literary movements born of crisis and doubt. The German Romantics (Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Ludwig Tieck, Josef von Eichendorff, Heinrich von Kleist, Adelbert von Chamisso, Heinrich Heine et al.) formulated an imaginative reaffirmation of German identity in response to the trauma of the Napoleonic occupation of German lands. Expressionists like Georg Heym, Georg Kaiser and Alfred Lichtenstein and Dadaists like Kurt Schwitters functioned as a visionary avant-garde responding to the economic and cultural collapse leading up to and in the wake of the First World War. Schwitters' visual and verbal collages constitute a realistic portrayal of a broken world. Post-Second-World-War lyrical realists, like Wolfgang Borchert, embodied a poetic attempt to re-member, to put the shattered fragments of the German identity back together and start over again after the cataclysm of the Holocaust and the Second World War. The collection also includes unclassifiable tales and texts, like those of Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann, that fit the tenets of no movements. The narratives gathered here have been variously referred to by those inclined to categorize as allegories, fairy tales, tales of the fantastic, parables, fables, prose poems and grotesques. I prefer to think of them as enigmatic tales. The common thread that runs throughout is a feverish intensity and a predilection for the stuff of dreams.

Styles and tactics vary. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', Tieck's 'Rune Mountain' and von Eichendorff's 'The Marble Statue' are prime examples of a hallucinatory literature of heightened consciousness and extreme states of mind. Hoffmann employs an ecstatic prose, a hybrid blend of half-science, mystical leanings, strained sobriety and barely controlled madness. (Freud, who attempted to elucidate the mysteries of 'The Sandman' in his essay 'On the Uncanny' ['Über das Unheimliche'], elsewhere, in a letter to Martha Bernays, dubbed the story 'mad, fantastic stuff'.) Tieck pits a traditional Teutonic fascination with mountains and forests against the sentimental lure of *Heimat* (homeland). Von Eichendorff ultimately resorts to religion to rein in and wrap up the chthonic anarchy of his hero's restless imaginings. And in a transcendent and totally original work like 'St Cecilia or the Power of Music', Heinrich von Kleist, the most and least Romantic of the lot, employs the astute tactical manoeuvring of a soldier and the sometimes dispassionate, sometimes plodding prose of a Prussian civil servant to render the ineffable. (A century later we will find a kindred tendency in Kafka.)

In 'Peter Schlemiel', Adelbert von Chamisso, a French émigré who discovered his literary voice in German, adds a twist of Gallic whimsy to the German *Märchen*, toying with its constraints, freeing it up with the wilful possibilities of unfettered metaphor. When asked which book by another author he would most like to claim as his own, the great twentieth-century Italian fabulist Italo Calvino cited Chamisso's small masterpiece. This eerie black comic tale of the hapless Schlemiel, who foolishly bartered his shadow for worldly stature and wealth, influenced the diverse likes of Hans Christian Andersen, who borrowed the premise for a story of his own, 'The Shadow'; Karl Marx, who alludes to it in his famous essay 'The

Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte'; Jacques Offenbach, who includes a likewise shadow-less character of the same name in his opera *Les contes d'Hoffmann*; J. M. Barrie, whose play *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, begins, as you may recall, with Peter in search of his lost shadow; and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who makes mention of it in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Having borrowed the Yiddish word *schlemiel*, a hopeless bungler liable to trip on his own shadow, from his Jewish friends in Berlin, with whom he identified as fellow outsiders, Chamisso returned the favour by introducing the term into the German language.

Among those with whom the homeless Frenchman crossed paths at the literary salon of Rahel Varnhagen, the converted Jewish muse of the Romantics, was Heinrich Heine. Heine paid tribute to Chamisso in *The Harz Journey*, where he noted his delight at discovering in the guest book of an inn at which he stopped 'the much-cherished name of Adelbert von Chamisso, the biographer of the immortal Schlemiel'.

The last Romantic and the first modernist, Heine, himself a Jewish convert to Christianity, had a field day with idealized German Romantic notions, singing odes to nature, and laughing all the while. In his description of the life of miners in 'Descent into the Mines', Heine sounds the depths of German *Märchen* and myth with a folklorist's eye, a poet's insight and a satirist's wit, in the process pressing the limits of German locution. The witty, vitriolic Austrian critic Karl Kraus went so far as to accuse him of having 'un-corseted the German language and enabled every Tom, Dick and Harry to fondle its breasts'.[5]

While reviling Heine, Kraus revered his fellow Viennese, Peter Altenberg, for cultivating the hybrid poetic-prose form Heine had launched. All three were consummate stylists, linked by their love and mastery of the German language, but also, incidentally, by their alienated stance as converted Jews straining for acceptance in a largely hostile society.

Jewish authors of the German language comprise an important literary strain in the early twentieth century, particularly in the literature of angst and enigma. In grotesques like 'The Magic Egg' and 'A New Kind of Plaything', Mynona (aka Salomo Friedlaender), a philosopher by training and temperament, manages to lace Kant's pure reason with the absurdist logic of Chelm, the legendary Jewish village of fools. The irreverent satires of Kurt Tucholsky and Egon Erwin Kisch, likewise included in this anthology, combine an in-your-face Jewish chutzpah with an unflinching German political idealism.

Scholars have traced Kafka's inspiration back to the dark parables of the Hasidic Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav and other Jewish mystics, the influence of which cannot be denied. Kafka's tales are indeed firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, reaching all the way back to the biblical Book of Jonah, the nightmare of a man literally engulfed and spat back out by the physical manifestation of his angst. But it would be a foolish error to try to extract Kafka's writings from the language and literary tradition in which they were written. As Tucholsky detected in a glowing review of 'In the Penal Colony',[6] Kafka had a more than passing affinity with Kleist. 'It is not

true, as people maintain, that dreams are dreamy,' Tucholsky wrote. 'So mercilessly hard, so gruesomely objective and crystal clear is this dream of Franz Kafka's […] Since [Kleist's novella] *Michael Kohlhaas* no German story has been written that with such conscious force appears to stifle every semblance of sympathy and yet is so infused with the spirit of its author.' In a letter to his sometime fiancée Felice, Kafka confirmed Tucholsky's prognosis, referring to Kleist as one of his 'true blood relations'.[7] Fellow misfits – Kleist scorned by the Prussian aristocratic lineage out of which he sprang, Kafka spurned by the assimilated Jewish provincial middle class that spawned him – both writers harvested their traumas, and managed in the merciless prose of the military tactician and the office bureaucrat, respectively, to capture and depict the incomprehensible.

A streak of melancholy and depression bordering on madness unquestionably runs through the authors and tales in this book. Hoffmann's hero Nathaniel toys with and ultimately succumbs to it, leaping to his death. Tieck's protagonist, the young hunter, likewise loses his mind. Von Eichendorff's young nobleman battles it out with his demiurges that almost get the better of him. Painstakingly depicting the contours and constraints of a hopeless world, a world from which he feels excluded, Kleist's last period on the long sentence of his short life is a bullet through the head. The great Austrian modernist master Robert Musil's tale 'The Blackbird' is a vivid account either of the inexplicable, the precise charting of an alternate universe, a parallel irreality, or of a descent into madness, which may very well be one and the same. Fellow *flâneurs*-raconteurs, the Austrian Peter Altenberg and Swiss Robert Walser, spent spells of time in insane asylums, Walser ultimately withdrawing to one, where he wiled away the last twenty years of his life. Georg Heym dramatized schizophrenia, a condition with which fellow Berliner Unica Zürn battled for much of her life, and to which she ultimately succumbed with a fateful leap. Kurt Tucholsky and Paul Celan were suicides, Ingeborg Bachmann a casualty of depression, alcohol and pills. And yet it would be ill advised to label their work the literature of lunatics.

Tucholsky and Celan surely had extenuating historical circumstances for their depression and their decision to end their lives. Society itself had gone mad. The collapse of social democracy and the seemingly unstoppable rise of Adolf Hitler drove Tucholsky first into exile and finally to his wits' end. Born in the Bukovina, at the time the easternmost German-speaking outpost of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, today in the Ukraine, poet Paul Celan saw his world collapse and lost his family and almost everything dear to him in the Holocaust – everything, that is, except for the German language. Though his was a death by drowning – he leapt into the Seine – one might well take the metaphoric liberty of suggesting that he strangled on the same syllables he had braided into verse.

It is precisely the uncanny ability of the authors in this book to hold on to lucidity, sometimes at considerable cost, often with an unsettling humour, and to share their flashes of insight into the dark recesses of the human condition, that makes their work worth reading.

Peter Wortsman
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NOTES

1. ‘Franz Kafka, the Vulture’, in *Selected Non-Fictions: Jorge Luis Borges*, edited by Elliot Weinberger (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999).
2. The German term *Dichter* applies, strictly speaking, not only to poets but also encompasses authors of prose of acknowledged literary merit.
3. *Café Klößchen, 38 Grotesken*, edited and with an afterword by Joachim Schreck (Berlin, DDR: Eulenspiegel Verlag, 1980).
4. ‘Flutes Offer Clues to Stone-Age Music’, Science Section, *The New York Times*, 24 June 2009.
5. ‘Heine und die Folgen’ (Heine and the Consequences), Karl Kraus, in *Untergang der Welt durch schwarze Magie* (Vienna and Leipzig: Verlag Die Fackel, 1922).
6. ‘In der Strafkolonie’, a review by Peter Panter (aka Kurt Tucholsky), *Die Weldbühne*, 3 June 1920.
7. In a letter from Franz Kafka to Felice Bauer, Kafka designated Grillparzer, Dostoyevsky, Kleist and Flaubert as ‘my true blood-relations’. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).

PART ONE

The Singing Bone

1812

The Brothers Grimm

Once upon a time a great lamentation arose in a certain land because of a wild boar that tore up the fields of the farmers, killed their livestock and ripped open people's bodies with its tusks. The king offered a rich reward to anyone who could rid the land of this calamity, but the beast was so big and strong that nobody dared to approach the forest in which it dwelt. Finally the king let it be known that whosoever captured or killed the wild boar would have the hand of his only daughter in marriage.

Now in this land there lived two brothers, sons of a poor man, who came to the king and were willing to take on this hazardous undertaking. The older brother, who was crafty and shrewd, offered his help out of pride; the younger brother, who was innocent and simple, did so out of the goodness of his heart.

The king said: 'So that you are all the more certain to find the beast, you will enter the forest from opposite sides.' The older one entered from where the sun sets and the younger one from where it rises.

And after the younger brother had been walking a short while, a little man came up to him, holding a black spear in his hand, and said: 'This spear I give you because your heart is pure and good; with it you may confidently set upon the wild boar, it will do you no harm.' He thanked the little man, hoisted the spear onto his shoulder and continued fearlessly on his way. It wasn't long before he spotted the beast, which came charging at him. He held out the spear, and in the creature's rage it clove its heart in two. Then he lifted the monster onto his shoulder and carried it homewards, wanting to bring it to the king.

When he emerged at the forest's far side, he came upon an inn where people went to make merry with dance and wine. His older brother had gone in, having thought to himself that the boar could wait, and that before setting out he would first fortify himself with a glass or two. When he spotted his younger brother emerging from the forest with the prized carcass on his back, his envious and vindictive heart would not let him be. He called to him: 'Do come in, dear brother, rest your weary bones and have a glass to refresh yourself.' The younger brother, who suspected no evil intent, went in and told his brother of the kind little man who gave him the spear with which he killed the boar. The older brother held him up till evening, then the two set out together. But when in the dark of night they came to a bridge over a brook, the older brother let the younger one go ahead, and halfway across the water struck him from behind so that he tumbled down dead. He buried him beneath the bridge, then took the boar and brought it to the king, pretending that it was he who

killed it, whereupon, as promised, he received the king's daughter's hand in marriage. And when the younger brother failed to return, he said: 'The boar must have mauled him,' and everyone believed him.

But since nothing can be hidden from the eyes of God, so too had this dark deed to be revealed. Many years later a shepherd drove his herd across the bridge and spotted a snow-white bone lying down below in the sand. He thought to himself: that would make a good mouthpiece. So he climbed down, picked it up and carved himself a mouthpiece for his horn. But when he blew on it for the first time, to the shepherd's great surprise the little bone started singing on its own:

> Oh, dear little shepherd boy,
> The bone you blow on knows no joy,
> My brother slay me.
> Beneath the bridge he laid me
> All for the wild boar's hide
> To make the king's daughter his bride.

'What a wondrous little horn is this,' said the shepherd, 'an instrument that sings by itself, I must bring it to the king.' And when he brought it before the king, the little horn started singing its song again. The king immediately understood its meaning, had the ground dug up under the bridge and all the slaughtered brother's bones were unearthed. The evil brother could not deny the deed, was sewn up in a bag and drowned, but the bones of the murdered one were laid to rest in the churchyard in a lovely grave.

Hansel and Gretel

1812

The Brothers Grimm

On the edge of a deep, dark wood there lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and his two children; the boy's name was Hansel and the girl was called Gretel. He had little to nibble or gnaw on, and once, when there was great famine in the land, he could no longer even bring home his daily crust of bread. As he kept ruminating and tossing and turning that evening in bed, he let out a sigh and said to his wife: 'What will become of us? How can we feed our poor children, as we ourselves have nothing to eat?'

'You know what, husband,' replied his wife, 'tomorrow bright and early we'll take the children into the woods to where it's darkest and deepest. There we'll light them a fire and leave them a last few crumbs of bread, then we'll go about our business and abandon them there. They'll never find their way home again and we'll be rid of them.'

'No, woman,' said the man, 'I will not do that; how can I ever find it in my heart to leave my children in the woods alone; the wild animals would soon come and tear them to pieces.'

'Oh, you fool,' she said, 'then all four of us will starve to death, all you'll have left to do is plane the planks for our coffins,' and she would not let up until he agreed.

'Still I feel sorry for my poor children all the same,' said the man.

But hunger kept the two children awake and they overheard what their stepmother said to their father. Gretel cried bitter tears and said to Hansel: 'Now we're done for.'

'Quiet, Gretel,' said Hansel, 'don't worry, I'll find a way out.' And once the grown-ups had fallen asleep, he got up, put on his little coat, opened the back door and slipped out. The moon shone very brightly, and the white pebbles scattered in front of the house glistened like silver. Hansel bent down and stuffed his coat pockets to bursting. Then he went back in and said to Gretel: 'Calm yourself, my dear little sister, and sleep tight, God will not forsake us,' and he lay back down in his bed.

At the break of day, even before sunrise, the woman came and woke the two children: 'Get up, you lazybones, we're going to the forest to fetch wood.' Then she gave each of them a crust of bread and said: 'Here's something for the midday meal, but don't eat it before then, for you'll get nothing else.'

Gretel took the bread into her apron pocket, because Hansel already had his pockets full of pebbles. Then they all set off for the forest.

After they had walked a while, Hansel stopped and peered back at the house, and did it again and again. The father said: ‘Hansel, why do you keep looking back and lagging behind, watch where you’re going and shake a leg.’

‘Oh, Father,’ said Hansel, ‘I’m looking back at my little white cat that’s seated on the rooftop and wants to say goodbye.’

The woman said: ‘Fool, that’s no cat, that’s the rising sun shining on the chimney.’ But Hansel hadn’t been looking at his cat; each time he turned he dropped a white pebble from his pocket on the path.

Once they’d reached the heart of the forest, the father said: ‘Go fetch wood, children, I’ll build you a fire so that you don’t freeze.’ Hansel and Gretel gathered brushwood, a whole heap of it.

The brushwood was lit, and when the flames burned high the woman said: ‘Now lay yourselves down beside the fire, children, and rest, we’re going into the forest to cut wood. When we’re done we’ll come back and get you.’

Hansel and Gretel sat by the fire, and when midday came, each ate their little crust of bread. And because they heard the sound of the wood axe chopping, they thought their father was near. But it was not the axe, it was a branch he’d tied to a withered tree that the wind rattled back and forth. And as they’d sat there waiting a long while, their eyes grew heavy with fatigue and they fell fast asleep.

When at last they woke up it was already the dead of night. Gretel started crying: ‘How will we ever find our way out of the woods!’

But Hansel comforted her: ‘Just wait a while until the moon rises, we’ll find our way all right.’

And when the full moon had risen, Hansel took his little sister by the hand and followed the white pebbles; they shimmered like newly minted coins and showed him the way. They walked the whole night and at daybreak got back to their father’s house.

They knocked at the door. The woman opened it, saw that it was Hansel and Gretel and said: ‘You naughty children, why did you sleep so long in the woods; we thought you’d never come home.’ But the father, whose heart was heavy at having left them behind, was overjoyed to see his children again.

Not long thereafter, things got bad again all over the land, and the children overheard their stepmother say to their father in bed at night: ‘We’re scraping the barrel again, all we have left is a half-loaf of bread, and then we’re done for. The children have to go. We’ll take them deeper into the forest this time so that they don’t find their way back; or else we’re doomed.’ The man felt bad, and thought: better I should share my last bite with my children. But the woman wouldn’t listen to anything he said, and kept on complaining and badgering him. One mistake leads to another, and because he had given in the first time he had to give in again.

But the children were still awake and had overheard the conversation. As soon as the grown-ups were asleep, Hansel got up again and wanted to go out to gather pebbles as he had the last time, but the woman had locked the door and Hansel could not get out. Still he comforted his little sister and said: ‘Don’t cry, Gretel, and sleep tight, God will help us, you’ll see.’

Early the next morning the woman came to drag the children out of bed. They each received a crust of bread that was even smaller than the last time. On the way into the woods, Hansel crumbled it in his pocket, often stopping to toss a crumb on the ground. ‘Hansel, why are standing there and looking around,’ said the father, ‘shake a leg.’

‘I’m looking after my little pigeon that’s perched on the rooftop and wants to wave goodbye,’ replied Hansel.

‘Fool,’ said the woman, ‘that’s no pigeon, that’s the morning sun shining on the chimney.’ But Hansel kept on dropping breadcrumbs along the way.

The woman led the children deeper and deeper into the woods, where they’d never been before. Another big fire was lit, and the stepmother said: ‘Just sit here, children, and when you get tired you can take a little nap – we’re going into the forest to cut wood, and in the evening when we’re done we’ll come and get you.’

At midday, Gretel shared her bread with Hansel, who had crumbled and scattered his share along the way. Then they fell asleep and darkness fell, but nobody came to pick up the poor children.

They awakened in the dead of night and Hansel comforted his little sister and said: ‘Just wait, Gretel, till the moon rises, then we’ll see the breadcrumbs I scattered and they’ll show us the way home.’

When the moon rose they set out, but they could not find any breadcrumbs, for the flocks of birds that circle woods and fields had eaten them up. They walked all night and another day from morning till evening, but they never made it out of the woods and were very hungry, as they’d eaten nothing but a few berries they found on the ground. And because they were so tired, their little legs couldn’t carry them any further, so they laid themselves down under a tree and fell asleep.

It was already the third morning since they’d left their father’s house. They began walking again, but they went ever deeper into the woods, and if help did not reach them soon they were done for.

At noon they spotted a lovely little snow-white bird perched on a branch that sang so sweetly they stopped and listened. And when it had finished singing, it flapped its wings and fluttered before them, and they followed it until they came to a little cottage on the roof of which it landed. When the children approached they saw that the cottage was built out of bread and covered with cake; but the windows were made of clear sugar crystal.

‘Let’s dig in,’ said Hansel, ‘and make a blessed meal of it. I’ll eat a piece of the roof, and you, Gretel, can sup on the window, which ought to taste sweet.’ Hansel reached out and broke a little bit of the roof off to see how it tasted, and Gretel walked up to the window pane and nibbled at it.

Whereupon a soft voice called out from within:

> Nibble, nibble, like a mouse,
> Who is nibbling at my house?

To which the children replied:

> The wind blows wild,
> The heavenly child,

and kept right on eating, without batting an eyelid.

Hansel, to whom the roof tasted delicious, tore off a great big hunk of it, and Gretel prised off a whole round window pane, sat herself down and promptly ate it up.

Then all of a sudden the door flew open and an old crone came hobbling out on a crutch. Hansel and Gretel were so petrified they dropped what they had in their hands. But the old woman just shook her head and said: 'Oh my dear little children, who brought you here? Come in, come in, and make yourselves at home, no harm will come to you here.' Then she took both of them by the hand and led them into her little house. She fetched out all kinds of good things to eat, milk and pancakes with sugar, apples and nuts. And afterwards, she made up two little beds with fresh white linen, and Hansel and Gretel laid themselves down and thought they were in heaven.

But the old woman only pretended to be nice; she was an evil witch who lay in wait for children, and had only built the house of bread to lure them into a trap. Whenever she laid her hands on a fresh young thing, she cooked it up and made a feast of it. Witches have red eyes and can't see very far, but they have a keen sense of smell, like animals, and know when people are approaching. When Hansel and Gretel came up close to her house, she sniggered and sneered to herself: 'I've got them in the bag, they won't get away.'

Early the next morning, before the children batted an eyelid, and still lay lost in their sweet slumber, she got up to peer at their round, rosy cheeks and muttered to herself: 'They'll make a tasty morsel.' Whereupon she grabbed Hansel with her bony-fingered hand, dragged him out to a little pen and locked him behind a wire gate; cry as he might, it did him no good. Then she went over to Gretel, shook her awake and yelled: 'Get up, you lazy bones, fetch me water from the well and cook your brother something good to eat, he's out there in the pen and I mean to fatten him up. And when he's good and plump I'll eat him.' Gretel started crying bitterly but it did her no good, she had to do what the evil witch wanted. So the finest food was cooked up for poor Hansel, yet Gretel got nothing but crayfish shells.

Every morning the old crone slipped off to the pen and cried: 'Hansel, stick your finger out so I can feel if you're fat enough.' But Hansel poked a little bone out of the pen, and the old crone, whose eyes were weak and couldn't see it, took it for Hansel's finger, surprised that he failed to fatten up. Once four weeks had gone by and Hansel still stayed skinny, she was gripped by impatience and couldn't wait any longer. 'Get a move on, Gretel!' she cried to the girl. 'Be quick and fetch me water – Hansel may be fat or lean, tomorrow I'll slaughter and cook him.'

Oh how the poor little sister wailed as she carried the water, and oh what a flood of tears ran down her cheeks! 'God help us!' she cried out. 'If only the wild animals in the woods had eaten us, at least we would have died together.'

'Save your whimpering,' said the old crone, 'it won't do you any good.'

Early the next morning Gretel had to go out to light a fire and put the kettle to boil. 'First we'll bake,' said the hag, 'I already lit the oven and kneaded the dough.' She prodded the poor girl over to the oven, from which flames shot out. 'Crawl in,'

said the witch, ‘and see if it’s hot enough to bake the bread.’ Once Gretel had poked her head in, the witch intended to slam the oven door shut, to roast her and eat her.

But Gretel grasped what she had in mind, and said: ‘I don’t know how to do it; how am I supposed to climb in?’

‘Foolish ninny,’ said the old crone, ‘as you can see for yourself, the opening is even big enough for me to climb into,’ whereupon she came hobbling over and poked her head in. Then Gretel gave her a shove so that she went tumbling in, heaved the iron door shut and slipped the latch.

Then the witch started howling something awful – ‘Ayyyyy!’ – but Gretel ran off, and the godless witch was burnt to a crisp.

Gretel scampered straight to Hansel, opened the pen and cried out: ‘Hansel, we’re saved, the old witch is dead.’ And as soon as the gate was opened, Hansel came flying out like a bird out of a cage. How they rejoiced, fell into each other’s arms, leapt for joy and covered each other with kisses! And because they had nothing more to fear, they went back into the witch’s house, in every corner of which stood cupboards filled with pearls and precious stones. ‘They’re better than pebbles,’ said Hansel, and stuffed as many as he could fit in his pockets.

And Gretel said: ‘I think I’ll take some too,’ and filled her apron with them.

‘We’d better go now and get out of the witch’s woods,’ said Hansel. But after they’d walked for hours, they came to a great big lake. ‘We can’t get across,’ said Hansel, ‘I don’t see ford or footbridge.’

‘There’s no boat either,’ said Gretel, ‘but there’s a little white duck swimming along; if I ask it, maybe it will help us get across.’ And she called out:

> Duckling, duckling, soft and white,
> There’s no ford or footbridge in sight.
> Gretel and Hansel beg you with a quack:
> Carry us across on your soft white back.

The duckling came swimming up, and Hansel sat himself on its back and bid his sister sit beside him. ‘No,’ replied Gretel, ‘the little duck can’t bear the weight of us both, let it ferry us across one after the other.’

The kind little creature did just that, and once they were safely across, the woods looked more and more familiar, and finally they glimpsed from afar their father’s house. Then they started running, burst in and fell into their father’s arms. The man had not had a moment of peace ever since he left his children in the woods, but his wife had died. Gretel shook her apron out, so that the pearls and precious stones spilt all over the room, and Hansel emptied his pockets, one fistful after another. Their troubles had come to an end, and they lived happily together. My fairy tale too has come to an end; there’s a mouse running there, whoever catches it can make himself a big fur hat.

The Children of Hameln

1816

The Brothers Grimm

In the year 1284 a curious man appeared in Hameln. He wore a coat of many-coloured cloth, which is why he was known as *Bundting*, Gaudy Garb. He said he was a rat catcher and promised, for a considerable compensation, to rid the city of all mice and rats. The burghers of Hameln came to an agreement with him, assuring a certain sum of money. The rat catcher pulled out a little pipe and blew on it, and then the rats and mice came running out of every house and gathered round him. And when he determined that there were none left, he headed out of the city and they all followed him, and he led them to the bank of the River Weser. There he undressed and walked into the water, whereupon all the rodents followed and, diving into the depths, promptly drowned.

But no sooner were the burghers delivered from the infestation than they thought twice about paying the promised price; coming up with all kinds of excuses, they refused to give the man what he asked. He stormed off angry and embittered.

At seven in the morning, others say at noon, on 26 June, St John's and St Paul's Day, he reappeared, this time dressed as a hunter with a strange red hat, his face twisted into a terrible grimace, and once again let his pipe be heard in the streets of Hameln.

Presently, instead of rats and mice, children in great numbers, boys and girls as young as four, came running, among them also the grown daughter of the *Bürgermeister*. They all followed him and he led them into the cleft in a mountain, where they and he disappeared.

This was witnessed by a nursemaid with a child in her arm who followed him from afar, turned around thereafter and brought word of it back to the city. With heavy hearts, the distraught parents searched high and low for their lost children; the mothers let out a pitiful wailing and weeping. Messengers were immediately sent out to comb every body of water and square inch of land in the vicinity, enquiring if anyone had seen hide or hair of the children – but to no avail. In all, a hundred and thirty children were lost.

It is said by some that two who had lagged behind, returned; one of them was blind, the other deaf. The blind one could not show, but only tell how they'd followed the piper; and the deaf one, on the other hand, indicated the place where the others disappeared, but had not heard a sound. Others tell that a little lad who followed in his shirtsleeves turned back to fetch his coat, which is why he survived the misfortune; for, once he returned, the others had already disappeared into the hole in a hill that can be seen to this day.

The street along which the children passed on their way out the gate was still, in the middle of the eighteenth century (as it is today) called the Street of Silence, since no dancing or music was permitted. Indeed, when a bride was serenaded on her way to church, the musicians had to stop playing on that street. The mountain near Hameln in which the children disappeared is called the Poppenberg; to the left and right of it two stone crosses were erected. Some say the children were led into a cave and came out again in Siebenbürgen.

The burghers of Hameln had the occurrence recorded in their civic register and made a custom of counting the years and days elapsed since the loss of their children. According to Seyfried, 22 rather than 26 June is the recorded date. A plaque with the following lines hangs on the wall of the Rathaus:

> In 1284, the year of our Lord
> Hameln registered the sad record
> Of a hundred and thirty children here born
> By a piper nabbed and ever mourned.

And on the new gate of the city is inscribed:

> *Centrum ter denos cum magnus ab urbe puellos*
> *Duxerat ante annos CCLXXII condita porta fuit.*

In the year 1572 the *Bürgermeister* had the story depicted in the pane of a stained-glass window along with an accompanying caption, which is unreadable today. A medallion marking the event is also affixed.

The Sandman

1816–17

E. T. A. Hoffmann

Nathaniel to Lothar

You must surely all be worried sick not to have had word from me in such a long, long time. Mother is, no doubt, mad at me, and Clara may well believe that I am living it up here, and have forgotten the face of my beloved angel so deeply and indelibly graven in my heart and mind. But it isn't so; every day of the week and every hour of the day I think of you all and my lovely little Clärchen's friendly figure floats past me in my dreams, smiling so sweetly at me with her bright eyes as she is wont to do whenever I walk in. Oh how could I put pen to paper in this wretched state that till now distracted my every thought! Something awful came into my life! Dark premonitions of a terrible impending fate cast their pall over me like the shadows of black storm clouds impermeable to any friendly rays of sunlight. Let me tell you then what happened to me. I have to tell you, that much I know; but just to think about it makes it spill out like a mad burst of laughter. Oh my dearest Lothar! How should I begin to make you fathom that what befell me just a few days ago could have such a devastating effect on my life! If only you were here, you could see for yourself; but by now you must surely take me for a crack-brained spook seer. In short, the terrible thing that happened to me, whose fatal impression I have tried in vain to erase from my consciousness, consists in nothing else than that a few days ago, namely on 30 October, at 12 noon, a barometer salesman stepped into my room and offered me his wares. I bought nothing and threatened to throw him down the stairs, whereupon, however, he promptly left of his own accord.

You suspect, I imagine, that only the most extraordinary life-altering relations could have lent this occurrence such significance, indeed that the very person of that miserable pedlar could have so cut me to the quick. And that is just what happened. I will pull myself together, with all the strength of my will-power, quietly and patiently to recount the circumstances of my early youth as plainly and precisely as possible so that you, with your alert mind, may take everything in and paint as clear as possible a picture of my condition. But even now as I begin, I can hear you laughing and Clara remarking: 'What childish notions!' Laugh, if you like, have yourself a right hearty laugh at my expense! Be my guest! But God in heaven, my hair stands on end, and it seems to me as if I were begging you in my mad desperation to make me sound ridiculous, like Franz Moor did Daniel. But it's time to begin!

Except for at lunchtime, we, my siblings and myself, saw little of my father during the day. He must have been very busy. After supper, which, according to long-standing custom, was served at seven o'clock, all of us, my mother and us, gathered in my father's study, and each took our place at a round table. Father smoked and drank a tall glass of beer. Often he told us many wondrous tales and would get so involved in the telling that his pipe went out, and it was my duty to fetch a burning wad of paper for him to relight it, a task that gave me the greatest pleasure. But many times he would just give us picture books to look at and sit there in silence propped up in his easy chair, blowing dense clouds of smoke, so that we all hovered as though in a fog. On such evenings mother was very sad and no sooner did the clock strike nine than she would declare: 'Now children, to bed! To bed with you! The Sandman's coming, I can sense it!' And every time she said it I really did hear the sound of slow, heavy steps lumbering up the stairs; it must have been the Sandman.

One time the muffled thump and lumbering step sounded particularly grim to me; so I asked mother as she led us away: 'Mama, who is that evil Sandman who always chases us away from Papa? What does he look like?'

'There is no Sandman, my dear child,' replied mother; 'when I say the Sandman is coming, all it means is that you children are sleepy and can't keep your eyes open, as if somebody had scattered sand in them.'

Mother's answer didn't satisfy me – indeed the notion took firm hold of my childish imagination that mother only denied the existence of the Sandman so that we wouldn't be afraid, didn't I hear him with my own two ears coming up the steps? With a burning desire to know more about this Sandman and his connection to us children, I finally asked the old woman who took care of my youngest sister: 'What kind of man is that, the Sandman?'

'Oh, Thanelchen,' she replied, 'don't you know yet? He's a bad man who comes to visit children when they won't go to sleep and flings a handful of sand in their eyes, so they scratch themselves bloody, then he flings them in his bag and carries them off to the half-moon to feed his children; they sit up there in their nest and have crooked beaks like owls with which they pick out the eyes of naughty human brats.'

So in my mind I painted a grim picture of that awful Sandman; as soon as I heard that lumbering step on the stairs I trembled with fear and horror. My mother could get nothing out of me but that one word stuttered amidst tears: 'Sandman! Sandman!' Then I bounded up to my bedroom and all night long I was tormented by the terrible presence of the Sandman.

By the time I was old enough to know that all that business about the Sandman and his children's nest on the half-moon the nanny had told me couldn't possibly be true, the Sandman had become entrenched in my mind as a hair-raising spook, and I was gripped by dread and terror when I heard him not only come clambering up the steps but tearing open the door to my father's study and barging in. Sometimes he stayed away a long time, but then he came more often, night after night. This went on for years, but I was never able to get used to that ghastly spook, nor did the grisly image of the Sandman ever fade from my mind.

I got ever more worked up about his dealings with my father; while some unbridgeable reserve kept me from asking him about it, the desire grew stronger from year to year to find out the secret for myself – to see the fabled Sandman with my own two eyes. The Sandman lured me down the path of wonder, the craving for adventure, that longing that had already taken seed in my childish mind. I liked nothing better than to hear or read fear-tingling tales of goblins, witches, sprites and suchlike; but the Sandman remained at the head of my list of the grisly figures I scribbled with chalk and charcoal on table tops, cupboards and walls.

When I turned ten, my mother moved me from the nursery into a little room off the corridor not far from my father's study. We still had to make ourselves scarce at the strike of nine, when that unseen presence was heard in the house. From my little room I distinctly heard him enter my father's chamber and soon thereafter it seemed to me as if the entire house filled with a strange-smelling vapour. My ever-mounting curiosity stirred my pluck to try and find a way to make the Sandman's acquaintance. Many times I slipped out into the corridor as soon as mother had passed, but I was too late, since by the time I reached the spot from which I might catch a glimpse of him, the Sandman had invariably already entered. Finally, driven by an overpowering urge, I decided to hide in my father's room and await the Sandman's appearance.

One evening, by my father's silence and my mother's sadness I surmised that the Sandman was coming; and so, pretending to be very tired, I excused myself before nine o'clock and hid in a nook beside my father's door. The front door creaked, the slow, heavy thud of steps advanced through the vestibule towards the stairs. Mother hastened by me with my brothers and sisters. Quietly then I opened my father's door. He was seated in silence, as usual, with his back to the door; he did not notice me slip in behind the curtain drawn over a closet where he hung his clothes.

Closer, ever closer came the thud of the steps; there was a curious cough and a scraping and a grumbling outside. My heart beat double-time in terror and expectation. Right there at the door came a powerful kick, a hefty blow on the latch, the door sprung open with a crash! Gathering all my pluck, I peeked out with great trepidation. The Sandman was standing there in the middle of the room in front of my father, the bright glow of the lamps lighting up his face. So the Sandman, the terrible Sandman, was the old barrister Coppelius who sometimes dined with us for lunch.

But the most hideous figure could not have instilled a deeper sense of horror in me than this Coppelius. Imagine a big, broad-shouldered man with a misshapen clumpish head, an ochre-coloured face and grey, bushy eyebrows, beneath which a pair of piercing, greenish cat's eyes peered forth, a big nose bent down over the upper lip. His crooked mouth often twisted into a crafty snigger, at which dark red spots appeared on his cheeks and a curious hissing tone issued from between his clenched teeth.

Coppelius always dressed in an old-fashioned ash grey coat, a waistcoat and pants of the same colour, with black socks and shoes affixed with tiny buckles. His minuscule toupee hardly covered his skull, his ear-locks hung out over his big red ears and a big, half-hidden tuft of hair poked out from the scruff of his neck so as to reveal the silver clasp of his collar.

His entire appearance was altogether repulsive and disgusting; but what disgusted us children the most were his big, knotty, hairy fists, so much so that we were repelled by anything he'd touched. He noticed this and consequently took great pleasure in finding this or that excuse to graze a piece of cake or some sweet fruit that our dear mother surreptitiously dropped on our plates, so that, with tears in our eyes, repulsion kept us from enjoying a sweet titbit that we would otherwise have savoured. He did that same thing when, on holidays, our father poured us a little glass of sweet wine. He would then pass his fist quickly over it, even bring the glass to his blue lips and laugh a devilish laugh when we quietly vented a sniffle of anger. He always called us the little beasts; we were not permitted to make a sound in his presence and cursed the hideous and hostile man who intentionally and maliciously spoilt our little pleasures. Our mother seemed to hate that disgusting man as much as we did; for as soon as he appeared her high spirits and easygoing, cheerful manner faded into a sad and dour solemnity. Father behaved in his presence as if he were a higher being whose incivility one had to tolerate and whom one had to humour in every way possible. He only dared make timid suggestions in his presence and was sure to serve his favourite dishes and the finest wines.

So when I set eyes on this Coppelius I felt a grisly shudder in my soul at the sudden realization that no one but he could be the Sandman, but now the Sandman was no longer the fairy-tale bogeyman who dragged children off to feed to his young in the owl's nest on the moon – no! He was a hideous, ghastly fiend who brought misery and want, temporal and eternal rack and ruin wherever he appeared.

Positively paralysed with fear at the thought of being caught and severely punished, I just stood there with my head outstretched, listening through the curtain. My father received Coppelius respectfully.

'Up now! To work!' the latter cried with a hoarse snarl and threw off his coat. In grim-faced silence father flung off his dressing gown and both pulled on long black smocks. I saw from where they took them. Father opened the folding door of a wall closet; but then I noticed that what I had long taken for a wall closet was not one at all, but rather a dark, hidden space fitted with a small hearth. Coppelius stepped forward and a blue flame flickered forth. All kinds of curious instruments were scattered about. Dear God! When my old father bent down towards the fire he looked altogether different. A ghastly convulsive pain seemed to have twisted the gentle, honest features of his face into a devilish grimace. He looked just like Coppelius. The latter swung the red-hot tongs and fetched a bright, flickering mass of ore out of the thick vapour, which he then assiduously hammered. It seemed to me as if human faces became visible all about, but without eyes – dreadful, deep, black hollows where the eyes ought to be.

'Eyes out, eyes out!' Coppelius cried with a muffled, roaring voice. Gripped by wild terror, I let out a scream and burst out of my hiding place onto the floor. Whereupon Coppelius grabbed hold of me and, baring his teeth, grumbled, 'Little beast! Little beast!' Picking me up, he hurled me at the hearth, so that the flames singed my hair. 'Now we've got eyes – eyes – a lovely pair of children's eyes,' Coppelius whispered, and with his fists grabbed glowing cinders from the flames which he intended to strew in my eyes.

But then my father pleaded with hands folded in prayer: 'Master! Master! Let my Nathaniel keep his eyes! Let him keep them, I beg you!'

Whereupon Coppelius gave off a shrill laugh and cried out: 'Let the boy keep his eyes and whimper his lesson through life; but let us take a close look at the mechanism of the hands and feet.' Whereupon he grasped me so hard that my joints snapped, and twisted off my hands and feet and reinserted them here and there. Coppelius sputtered and lisped: ''Tis not right this way! 'Twas good the way it was! The old man got it right!' and everything around me went dark, a sharp cramp flitted through my nerves and limbs – and then I felt nothing.

A warm and gentle breath wafted over my face, and I awakened, as if out of a deathlike sleep, with my mother bent over me. 'Is the Sandman still here?' I stammered.

'No, my dear child, he's been gone a long, long time, he won't hurt you!' my mother said and kissed and cuddled her recuperated little darling.

Why should I try your patience, my dearest Lothar! Why should I keep babbling in minute detail when there's still so much to be told? Enough! Suffice to say that I was caught eavesdropping and mishandled by Coppelius. Fear and trembling had afflicted me with a high fever, with which I lay sick for several weeks. 'Is the Sandman still here?' Those were the first clear words to issue from my lips and the sign of my recovery, my salvation. Let me just still tell you the most terrible moment of my youth; then you'll be convinced that it's not the failing of my eyes that makes everything appear colourless, but rather that a dark destiny has draped a veil of clouds over my life,

which perhaps I may only rip through in death.

Coppelius stopped coming by; we were told that he'd left town.

It was about a year later, as we sat in the evening, true to our old family custom, at the round table. Father was very chipper and entertained us with delightful stories from the travels of his youth. Then at the strike of nine, we suddenly heard the front door hinges creak and slow, leaden steps thumped through the hallway and up the steps. 'It's Coppelius,' said mother, going pale in the face.

'Yes! It is Coppelius,' father confirmed with a weak and broken voice. Tears streamed from mother's eyes.

'But father, father!' she cried, 'must it be so?'

'This one last time,' he replied, 'it's the last time he comes here, I promise you. Just go, go with the children! Go! Go to bed! Goodnight!'

I felt as if I'd been pressed into cold, heavy stone – my breath stood still! Mother grabbed hold of my arm when I remained standing there: 'Come, Nathaniel, come along, please!' I let her lead me, I went into my room. 'Be quiet, be quiet, just go to bed! – sleep – sleep,' mother cried after me; but, torn as I was by my inner fear and turmoil, I could not close an eye. The picture of that hated, repulsive Coppelius stood there sniggering at me with his sparkling eyes; in vain did I try to erase the image from my mind.

It might already have been midnight when a terrible boom went off, as if a cannon had been fired. The whole house rumbled, it rattled and roared past my door, the front door was slammed shut with a mighty clatter. 'That's Coppelius!' I cried out in terror and leapt from my bed.

Then came a piercing shriek and a wretched wail, and I rushed to my father's room. The door stood open, a suffocating steam hit me in the face, the chambermaid cried out: 'Oh, the master! The master!'

In front of the steaming hearth my father lay dead on the floor with his terribly contorted face burnt black. My sisters howled and whined around him, my mother lay unconscious at his side. 'Coppelius, you cursed Satan, you killed my father!' I cried out, whereupon I lost consciousness. Two days later, when they laid my father in his coffin, his expression was once again mild and gentle as it had been in life. It was at least comforting to think that his pact with that devilish Coppelius could not have condemned him to eternal damnation.

The explosion had awakened the neighbours; the incident seemed suspicious to them and they informed the authorities, who issued a warrant for Coppelius' arrest. But he had disappeared without a trace.

If I tell you, dearest friend, that that barometer salesman was none other than the accursed Coppelius, you will not, I trust, think ill of me for taking his inimical reappearance as a sign of bad things to come. He was dressed differently, but Coppelius' physique and facial features are too deeply engraved in my memory for me to mistake him for another. Moreover, Coppelius did not even change his name. He now pretends to be a Piedmontese mechanic and calls himself Giuseppe Coppola.

I have resolved to confront him and to avenge my father's death, come what will.

Don't tell mother a thing about that terrible creature. Give a hug to my dear sweet Clara, I'll write to her when I've calmed down a bit. Be well, etc. etc.

Clara to Nathaniel

It is true that you haven't written to me in quite a while, but I still believe that you think of me and hold me dear. I was surely very much on your mind, for though you intended to send your last letter to my brother Lothar, you unwittingly addressed it to me, not him. I tore open the envelope with joy and only realized the error upon reading the words: 'Oh, my dearest Lothar' – I know I ought not to have gone on reading after that, but rather to have handed the letter to my brother. But seeing as you sometimes reproached me in a childish, teasing way that I had such a calm, ladylike, sensible disposition that, before fleeing a house about to collapse I would be inclined quickly to smooth out a wrinkle in the curtain, I dare hardly admit that the first lines of your letter upset me profoundly. I could hardly breathe, my eyes went blank. Oh, my dearly beloved Nathaniel! What terrible thing could have burst into your life! Being separated from you, the possibility of never seeing you again, that thought pierced my breast like the sharp blade of a dagger. I read and read! Your description of that disgusting Coppelius is really horrible.

Only now did I fathom that your dear old father died such a terrible, violent death. My brother Lothar, to whom I passed the letter, tried in vain to calm me down. The image of that despicable

barometer pedlar Giuseppe Coppola pursued me wherever I went, and I am almost ashamed to admit that he even managed to trouble my ordinarily unruffled and restful sleep with all sorts of nightmarish phantasms. But soon thereafter, in fact by the very next day, my mood calmed down. Don't be mad at me, my dearest one, if Lothar tells you, despite your strange premonition that Coppelius would harm you, that I am once again my old cheerful, carefree self.

Let me confess here and now my firm conviction that all the awful and frightening things you speak of only happened in your imagination, and that the real outside world played little part in it. That old Coppelius may well have been repulsive enough, but the fact that he hated children made you and your siblings develop a real aversion to him.

Your childish imagination naturally associated your nanny's nursery account of the terrible Sandman with old Coppelius, who for you, even though you didn't believe in the Sandman, remained a fantastic monster of the kind children fear so intensely. The weird goings-on with your father at night were surely nothing other than alchemical experiments the two conducted together in secret, with which your mother may not have been pleased, since a lot of money was no doubt uselessly squandered in the process – on top of which, as is always the case with such laboratory assistants, your father became so consumed by the elusive craving for higher wisdom that he forgot about the family. Your father probably brought about his own death by a careless mistake, and Coppelius is not to blame. Can you believe that yesterday I asked the pharmacist next door if such a sudden deadly explosion ever occurred during chemical experiments? He said: 'Yes, indeed,' and described for me in his typical long-winded and minute manner how such a thing could happen, in the process citing all kinds of curious-sounding substances I cannot now recall. Now you'll get angry with your Clara. You'll say: 'Not a ray of the mysterious that embraces us with its invisible arms could break into that cold nature of yours; it only fastens on the colourful surface of things and takes a childish delight in the glittering golden fruit whose flesh contains a deadly poison hidden within.'

Oh my dearly beloved Nathaniel! Don't you think that even a cheerful – unaffected – carefree nature like mine could harbour an inkling of a dark force that insidiously strives to corrupt the sanctum of our inner self? But forgive me if, innocent girl that I am, I dare imply what I really think of that inner battle. I can't find the right words to say it and you're probably laughing at me, not because I mean to say something foolish, but because I am having such a hard time saying it.

If there is a dark force that can insidiously slip a perfidious filament into our innermost self, wherewith it then grabs hold of us and drags us along on a dangerously destructive path that we would not otherwise have taken – if there is such a force then it must reconfigure itself in our image, indeed it must become us; for only in *this* way will we be inclined to believe in it and give it the space it needs to realize its shadowy end. If we have enough good sense, fortified by healthy living, to recognize strange inimical influences as such, and steadfastly to hold to the path our nature and calling prescribe, then that sinister force will fail in the futile attempt to fashion itself in our image. It is also certain, Lothar adds, that that dark physical force to which we surrender ourselves of our own free will often makes us internalize strange figures that life flings into our path, so that we merely rouse the spirit which our vivid delusion makes us believe emanates from that figure. It is the phantom of our own self whose deep affinity and profound influence on our state of mind either damns us to hell or uplifts us into heaven. You see, my best beloved Nathaniel, that we, my brother Lothar and I, discussed at length the subject of dark forces and compulsions, which, seeing as I have taken great pains to formulate the essential, now seems to me to be very deep indeed. I don't quite grasp Lothar's last point, though I have a sense of what he means and firmly believe it to be true. I beg you, erase the image of that ugly barrister Coppelius and the barometer pedlar Giuseppe Coppola from your mind. Be assured that these strange figures have no power over you; only your belief in their malevolent power can, in fact, make them malevolent to you. If the deep upset of your soul did not cry out in every line of your letter, if your state of mind did not shake me as profoundly as it does, in truth I could make light of your Mr Sandman, Esq. and that barometer pedlar Coppelius. Be cheerful – cheerful! I have decided to come to you and act as your guardian angel, and should that repulsive Coppelius dare reappear and trouble you again in your dreams, I will exorcize him with loud laughter. I am not in the least bit afraid of him and his loathsome fists; he will not spoil a tender titbit with his barrister's touch or steal my eyes as the Sandman.

Forever, my dearly beloved Nathaniel, etc. etc. etc.

Nathaniel to Lothar

I am very sorry that, granted, on account of my own absent-minded mistake, Clara recently tore open and read the letter I wrote to you. She wrote me a very profound philosophical response in which she took great pains to prove that Coppelius and Coppola only existed in my imagination and were phantoms of my own troubled self, phantoms that would be instantaneously reduced to dust if only I recognized them as such. It is indeed hard to believe that the spirit that emanates from such a brightly smiling, sweet child's eyes could display such brilliant insight. She cites you. So you talked about me. You instruct her in logical disputation so that she may learn to sort and filter out the chaff from the grain. Better leave it alone!

By the way, it's certain that the barometer pedlar Giuseppe Coppola is not the old lawyer Coppelius. I've just begun attending the lectures of the recently arrived Professor of Physics who, like the illustrious naturalist, is also named Spalanzani, and is of Italian descent. He has known Coppola for a good many years and, moreover, you can tell from the pedlar accent that he really is Piedmontese. Coppelius was a German, but no true blue one, I think. I'm still not altogether calmed down. Even if you and Clara take me for a dark dreamer, I cannot erase the terrible impression of Coppelius' accursed face. I'm glad, as Spalanzani claims, that Coppelius has flown the coop. This Professor is a wondrous sort, a round, little man with high cheekbones, a finely chiselled nose, pouting lips and small piercing eyes. But you can get a clearer picture of him if you look at Chodowiecki's* portrait of Cagliostro† in any Berlin pocket calendar. That's just what Spalanzani looks like.

I recently discovered while climbing the steps to the lecture hall that the glass door ordinarily covered with a curtain left a visible crack open at the side. A tall, very slender and well-proportioned, splendidly dressed lady sat in a room at a little table on which she rested both her arms, with her hands folded before her. She was seated just opposite the door, so I got a good look at her angelically lovely face. She did not seem to notice me and, in fact, her eyes had something glassy about them – I'd almost be inclined to say they could not see; it seemed to me as if she slept with open eyes. I felt the strangest rush of feeling and, therefore, slipped quietly off to the auditorium next door.

Later I learnt that the lovely figure I spotted was Spalanzani's daughter Olympia, whom for some strange reason he keeps locked up so that no one can come near her. I've begun to think there is something peculiar about her, that perhaps she's simple-minded. But why do I write to you about all this? I could have told it to you more clearly and in greater detail in person. I might as well admit that I'll be visiting you in two weeks' time. I simply had to see my sweet angel-faced Clara again. By then the ill humour brought on (I must admit) by that annoyingly understanding letter of hers that sought to sound my depths will have blown over. Which is why I'm not writing to her today.

A thousand greetings, etc. etc. etc.

It would be impossible to imagine anything more incredible and strange than what happened to my poor friend, the young student Nathaniel, and which, dear reader, I have undertaken to tell you. Have you, gentle reader, ever experienced anything that so completely permeated your heart, your mind and your thoughts that it supplanted all other notions? Something that simmered and seethed in you, that made your blood boil and flow like lava through your veins and made your cheeks turn a fiery red. A thing that turned your gaze so eerie, as if it sought to grasp the presence of figures imperceptible to all other eyes in an empty room, as your words melted into dark moans. And your intimates asked you: 'What is it, friend? What on earth is the matter with you?' And then you wanted to describe your state of mind in all the glowing colours and shadows and lights, and strained to find the words, and didn't know where to begin. But it seemed to you as if with your very first word you felt compelled to evoke all the wondrous, beautiful, horrible, laughable, frightening things that happened, so that your account would strike your listeners like an electric shock. But every word that came to mind, anything that language could

conjure up, seemed colourless, frigid and dead. You searched and searched, and stuttered and stammered, and the sensible questions of friends struck like icy gusts of wind that soon dissipated in the emotional cauldron within. But had you, like a bold painter, begun with a few audacious brush strokes to set down the rough outline of your state, you would have been able to apply with great ease ever brighter dabs of colour, and so to dazzle your friends with the living swirl of multifarious figures, and they would see themselves, as you see yourself, in the middle of the picture that issued from your imagination.

No one, I must admit, gentle reader, ever actually asked after the story of young Nathaniel; but as you well know, I am one of those rum writers to whom, if burdened with impressions of the kind I've just described, it seems as if anyone who happens to cross their path, indeed the whole world, were dying to know: 'What's bothering you? Pray tell us if you please!' So I felt a pressing need to speak to you of Nathaniel's fateful path. The very wondrousness and strangeness of it consumed my consciousness, but for that very reason – and because I needed to make you, dear reader, likewise inclined and, therefore, able to bear the things I am about to tell, which is no small feat – I tormented myself as to how to begin my account in a significant, original, gripping fashion.

'Once upon a time' – the nicest start to any tale – seemed too vapid! 'In the small provincial town of S. there lived …' sounded a bit better, at least informative enough to pave the way for the climax. Or to begin right off *in medias res*: ' "The devil take you!" the young student Nathaniel cried out with a wild-eyed look of anger and dread at the sight of the barometer pedlar Giuseppe Coppola' – this I had, in fact, already written down when I was suddenly struck by something droll in the wild-eyed look of the young student Nathaniel; but the story is not in the least bit comical. I could find no words to reflect even the faintest glimmer of the burning heart of the matter. So I decided to dispense with the beginning.

Just take the three letters, gentle reader, that my friend Lothar was kind enough to pass on to me, as the outline of the picture, to which I will take pains to add more and more colour in the telling. Maybe I will manage, like a good portrait painter, to conjure up a character such that you will find a convincing resemblance without knowing the original; indeed that it will seem to you as if you had seen that person many times with your own two eyes. Maybe then, dear reader, you will believe that there is nothing more wondrous and strange than life itself, and that all that the poet can do is convey a dark reflection of it in a lightly buffed mirror.

So as to clarify what the reader needs to know from the start, I must add to the aforementioned letters that shortly after the death of Nathaniel's father, Clara and Lothar, the children of a distant relative who likewise died and left them orphaned, were taken in by Nathaniel's mother. Clara and Nathaniel took a great liking to each other, to which no person on earth objected; they were therefore betrothed when Nathaniel left home to pursue his studies in G., which is where we find him in his last letter, attending lectures by the famous Professor of Physics Spalanzani.

Now I could confidently press on with the tale; but at the moment I have such a vivid image of Clara's face before my eyes that I cannot look away, which is what

always happened when she looked my way with her lovely smile. Clara could by no means have been considered beautiful; such was the opinion of all those who claimed to know a thing or two about beauty. And yet the architects of beauty praised the sleekness and symmetry of her stature, the painters found neck, shoulders and bust almost too maidenly, but were all enamoured of her Magdalene hair and raved about her luminous colouring. But one of them, a real fantast, strangely enough compared Clara's eyes to a Ruisdael lake in which the azure blue fundament of a cloudless sky and the forest and flowering flora of the lush landscape of life were mirrored. But the poets and thinkers were even more ebullient and said: 'What lake – what mirror! Can one gaze at this girl without having heavenly songs and notes come streaming from her eyes, music that reaches deep into our innermost selves, awakening and bestirring all our dormant passions?' If we ourselves try to sing her praises and the song falls flat, a crude croon masquerading as a serenade with haphazard tones carelessly warbled, the fault is ours and Clara's lips say it all in their delicately elastic smile. That's the way it was.

Clara had the healthy imagination of a cheerful, unaffected child, a deep womanly gentle disposition, and a downright sparkling, sharp-sighted intelligence. The mystics and conjurers failed to impress her; for without saying much – idle chatter was anathema to her quiet nature – her bright gaze and that hint of irony in her smile said: dear friends, do you really expect me to take your ephemeral shadow figures for real live people with impulses and emotions? For that reason, Clara was scorned by many as cold, emotionless, prosaic; but others with a sober grasp of all the twists and turns of life had a powerful affection for that tender, understanding, childish girl, none more so than Nathaniel, a young man seriously and passionately committed to the study of science and the arts. Clara was attached to her beloved with all her heart and soul; the first storm clouds troubled their life when he went away to study. With what rapture, then, you can well imagine, did she fly into his arms, when, as he let slip in his last letter to Lothar, he actually showed up in his home town at his mother's doorstep. It was just as Nathaniel expected; for as soon as he saw Clara again he forgot all about the lawyer Coppelius and Clara's letter, and his upset disappeared.

But Nathaniel was indeed right when he wrote to his friend Lothar that the appearance of that odious barometer pedlar Coppola had had a detrimental effect on his life. Everyone felt within days of his arrival that Nathaniel was a changed man. He fell into dark brooding spells and began to behave so strangely, in ways that one would never have expected of him. Everything, his entire life, had become the stuff of dream and premonition; he kept saying that everyone who gave free rein to his fancies merely served as a plaything in the terrible game of dark forces, that all resistance was in vain, and all one could do was meekly to submit to the will of fate. He went so far as to maintain that it was foolish to believe that spontaneity could affect the arbitrary outcome of artistic and scientific investigations; for the passion needed to pursue such work does not come from our innermost selves, but rather derives from the external influence of a higher principle independent of our own free will.

Such mystical musings were altogether repugnant to the sensible Clara, yet it seemed futile to attempt to prove him wrong. But it was only when Nathaniel insisted that Coppelius was the incarnation of the evil principle that had taken hold of him, pulling the strings from behind an invisible curtain, that Clara suddenly fathomed that this disgusting demon threatened to disrupt their happy love, grew very serious and said: 'Yes, Nathaniel, you're right, Coppelius is an evil inimical principle, a devilish force that infiltrated your life able to do dreadful things, but only if you refuse to banish him from your thoughts and feelings. As long as you believe in him he does indeed exist and affect you, only your belief gives him the power over you.'

Furious that Clara only accepted the existence of demons as a function of his state of mind, Nathaniel wanted to counter with a disquisition on the entire mystical teachings of devils and uncanny forces; but, vexed in turn, Clara cut him short by suddenly bringing up some altogether irrelevant matter, which made Nathaniel all the more angry.

Cold, unreceptive spirits do not open their hearts to such deep secrets, Nathaniel thought, without fully fathoming that he counted Clara among those lesser natures, which is why he did not stop trying to initiate her into those esoteric teachings. Early in the morning when Clara helped prepare breakfast, he stood by her and read to her from all sorts of mystical texts, whereupon Clara protested: 'But my dear Nathaniel, what if I were to blame *you* for the evil principle that's keeping my coffee from brewing? For if, as you wish, I were to drop everything and look you in the eyes as you read to me, then my coffee will boil over and burn and you won't get your breakfast!'

Nathaniel slammed the book shut and ran in a rage to his room. In the past he had had a charming, lively talent for reading aloud the stories that he jotted down, to which Clara listened with the greatest pleasure; but now his writings were dark, incomprehensible, shapeless, so that even though, not wanting to hurt him, Clara said nothing, he nevertheless sensed how unreceptive she was. Nothing was more deadly for Clara than this boring stuff; in every look and word she revealed her insurmountable intellectual ennui. Nathaniel's writings were indeed a crashing bore. His chagrin at Clara's cold prosaic spirit grew; she simply could not shake off her displeasure at Nathaniel's dark, morbid, boring mysticism, and so the two drifted inwardly further and further apart without noticing it.

The figure of that repulsive Coppelius faded in his imagination, as Nathaniel himself had to admit, so that he had to take great pains to paint a vivid picture of him in his writings, in which he appeared as the bogeyman. Finally one day he felt impelled to express that dark premonition that Coppelius would disrupt his happy love as the subject of a poem. In the poem he represented himself and Clara as bound by true love, but every now and then it was as if a dark fist reached into their life and ripped out any seed of joy that sprouted in the garden of their hearts. Finally, when they were already standing together at the marriage altar, that terrible Coppelius appears and touches Clara's sweet smiling eyes; they burst open against his breast, searing and burning like bloody sparks, whereupon Coppelius seizes

Nathaniel and flings him into a flaming circle of fire that spins at the speed of lightning and hurls him about in a blue blaze. Then comes a roar, as if the angry tempest whipped up the foaming waves of the sea that rear up in battle like white-hooded black giants. But through this wild roar he hears Clara's voice: 'Can you not see me? Coppelius deceived you, those were not my eyes that burned in your breast, they were the glowing drops of your own heart's blood – I still have my eyes, just look at me!' And Nathaniel thinks: it *is* Clara, and I am hers for ever. Then it is as if the thought reaches into the circle of fire, stops suddenly, and the roar fades into a dull thud in the black abyss. Nathaniel peers into Clara's eyes; but it is the face of death that smiles back at him with Clara's eyes.

While engaged in the composition of this poem Nathaniel remained very quiet and collected; he polished and tinkered with every line, and since he chose to follow the rule of metre, he did not rest until everything fitted together and sounded just right. When he was nevertheless finally done with it and read the poem out loud to himself he was totally appalled and, gripped by a wild sense of horror, cried out: 'Whose terrible voice is this?' But soon the whole thing just seemed to him to be a very successful poetic text, and he was convinced that it would excite Clara's cold heart, although he failed to consider just where her excitement might lead and to what end he wished to frighten her with such gruesome images, foreshadowing a terrible fate that would tear their love apart.

They, Nathaniel and Clara, sat together in his mother's little garden, Clara as cheerful as could be because Nathaniel had not tormented her with his dreams and dark premonitions for the last three days, which he'd spent tinkering with the poem. Even Nathaniel spoke in a lively and spirited manner of funny things, like before, so that Clara said: 'Now at last I have you all to myself again, you see how we drove out that repulsive Coppelius?' That reminded Nathaniel of the poem in his pocket, which he'd intended to read aloud. He promptly pulled out the pages and started reading.

Expecting the same tedious stuff as before, and prepared to endure it, Clara started quietly knitting. But as the storm cloud of his verse grew ever darker and darker around them she let the knitted stocking sink into her lap and looked Nathaniel hard in the eye. Swept along by the fire of his poetry, his cheeks tinted bright red by the cauldron of turbulent emotions, tears welled up in his eyes. Having finally reached the conclusion, he heaved a heavy sigh of exhaustion, gripped Clara's hand and sobbed, as though dissolving in inconsolable sadness: 'Oh, Clara! … Clara!'

She pressed him gently to her breast and said quietly, but very slowly and succinctly: 'Nathaniel – my dearly beloved Nathaniel! Throw that raving – senseless – insane fairy tale into the fire.'

Whereupon, shoving Clara away from him, Nathaniel leapt up in a fury and cried out: 'You lifeless, accursed automaton!' He ran off, leaving Clara completely mortified, weeping bitter tears.

'He never loved me, he doesn't understand me!' she wailed at the top of her lungs. Lothar came striding into the arbour. Clara felt compelled to tell him what

had happened. Lothar loved his sister with all his heart; every word of her accusation struck him like a spark, so that the ill will he'd long felt for that muddle-headed Nathaniel now flared up into wild anger. He ran to find him, reproached him with harsh words for his inexplicable treatment of his beloved sister, and the irascible Nathaniel replied in kind. A wild and crazy fop faced off with a miserable, mundane man of the people. A duel was inevitable. They decided, according to the local academic custom, to meet behind the garden and draw sharp-bladed rapiers.

Silently and stealthily they slipped by; Clara had heard and seen the heated argument, and spotted the duelling master bringing the rapiers at dusk. She guessed what was about to happen. Lothar and Nathaniel had just reached the duelling ground and flung off their coats in brooding silence, a bloodthirsty fury pouring from their burning eyes, when Clara came bounding through the garden gate. Sobbing she cried out: 'Oh you barbaric beastly men! Cut me down right this moment before going at it with each other; for how am I supposed to go on living in this world if my beloved murders my brother, or my brother my beloved!'

Lothar let his sword sink and peered at the ground in silence, and all the heart-rending love Nathaniel had felt in the sweet days of youth for his precious Clara once again flared up in him. The deadly weapon fell from his hand and he flung himself at Clara's feet. 'Can you ever forgive me, my only, my ever so dearly beloved Clara! Can you forgive me, my dearest brother Lothar!' Lothar was stirred by the profound pain of his friend; the three young people, now reconciled, embraced in a flood of tears and swore henceforth faithfully to hold by their love.

Nathaniel felt as though a heavy weight that had pressed him to the ground had been lifted from his shoulders – indeed as though in resisting the dark force that had held him in its sway he had saved his entire being from the threat of annihilation. He spent three more blissful days with his loved ones and then rode back to G., where he had to complete another year of study, after which he planned to return for good to his native town.

Everything having to do with Coppelius was kept from his mother; since the three friends knew all too well that she could not think of him without trembling, for, like Nathaniel, she too blamed him for the death of her husband.

Imagine how stunned Nathaniel was when, intending to return to his apartment, he found the entire house burnt to the ground, so that only the charred walls still rose from the rubble heap. Braving the fire that had started in the laboratory of the apothecary on the first floor and engulfed the house in flames from the bottom up, a few resolute friends had nevertheless managed in the nick of time to dash up to Nathaniel's room and save his books, manuscripts and instruments. They succeeded in carrying everything intact to another house, where they rented a room for him, to which Nathaniel promptly moved in.

He was not particularly surprised to discover that he lived directly opposite Professor Spalanzani, nor did it seem strange to him when he realized that from his window he could peer directly into the room in which Olympia often sat alone, positioned in such a way that he could clearly recognize her figure, while her facial

features remained blurred and vague. But after a while it did indeed strike him as strange that Olympia often sat for hours on end in the same stance she had assumed when he once glimpsed her through the glass door, perched before a small table, apparently engaged in no activity, and that she clearly cast a fixed gaze in his direction. He likewise had to admit to himself that he had never set eyes on a lovelier female figure; but, holding true to Clara in his heart, he remained largely oblivious to Olympia's stiff, stone-cold allures, and only every now and then did he cast furtive looks over his open compendium at the comely statue – that was all.

He was just writing to Clara when he heard a light knock; upon his invitation to enter, the door swung open a crack and Coppola's repulsive face peered in. Nathaniel felt a shudder of terror run through him; mindful, however, of what Spalanzani had told him about his compatriot Coppola, and that he had given his sacred word to his beloved to lend no more credence to the Sandman Coppelius, he himself was ashamed of his childish fears. With a great effort he pulled himself together and spoke as calmly as possible: 'I'm not going to buy a barometer, my dear friend, so you might as well be going!'

At which, however, Coppola stepped squarely into the room and spoke with a hoarse voice, his broad mouth twisted into an ugly laughter, his sparkling little eyes casting a piercing look beneath the wink of his long grey lashes: 'Forget barometer, bah! I bring pair o' lovely peepers!'

Horrified, Nathaniel cried out: 'Strange man, how can you have eyes for sale? Eyes? Eyes?'

But then and there Coppola shoved aside his barometers, reached into his deep coat pocket and pulled out spectacles and eyeglasses which he laid out on the table. 'Look – glass – glass – what you put on *you* nose, eyes a pretty – eyes a pretty!' Whereupon he pulled out more and more eyeglasses, so that the entire table was soon flickering and sparkling.

A thousand eyes peeped and twitched and stared at Nathaniel; but he was unable to turn away from the table, and Coppola kept laying out more and more eyeglasses, and ever wilder and wilder did those glaring gazes land, helter-skelter, shooting their blood-red rays at Nathaniel's breast. Overcome by frantic horror, he cried out: 'Stop it! Stop it, you wretched creature!' He grabbed Coppola by the arm as the latter, oblivious, reached yet again into his pocket to fetch more glasses to add to the heap that covered the table.

But Coppola shook himself free, and with a hoarse, repulsive laugh, muttered: 'Oh! This not for you! But look here, lovely glass!' – wherewith he swept up all the eyeglasses, shoved them back into his coat pocket, and from another pocket pulled out a number of big and little telescopes and field glasses.

As soon as the eyeglasses were out of sight Nathaniel grew calm again and, mindful of Clara's words, had to admit to himself that the terrible spook was a figment of his own imagination, and that Coppola was an altogether honest craftsman and lens grinder and could not possibly be Coppelius' cursed doppelgänger and shadow figure. He realized, furthermore, that there was nothing strange about all the lenses that Coppola now laid out on the table, nothing ghastly

like the eyeglasses, and to make amends Nathaniel now decided actually to buy something from him. He reached for a small, very finely crafted pocket looking-glass and, to test it, peered out the window.

Never in his life had he come upon a looking-glass that so clearly and sharply brought distant objects before his eyes in such clear focus. He unintentionally peered into Spalanzani's room; Olympia sat there, as usual, at the little table, with her arms resting on it and her hands folded. Now for the first time Nathaniel espied Olympia's exquisitely lovely face. Only the eyes appeared strange, blank and dead. But as he brought her face into greater and greater focus in the looking-glass, it seemed to him as if Olympia's eyes flashed open in moist moonbeams. It was as if she had only now acquired the power of sight; her glances grew livelier and livelier. Nathaniel lingered at the window, transfixed, unable to take his eyes off the stunningly lovely Olympia. He was awakened, as if out of a deep dream, by the sound of throat-clearing and scraping.

Coppola stood behind him: 'Tre zecchini – three ducats!' Nathaniel, who had completely forgotten the optician, quickly counted out the asking price. 'Fine glass – fine glass – is it not?' asked Coppola with his repulsive hoarse voice and his crafty smile.

'Yes, yes, indeed!' Nathaniel replied, greatly vexed. 'Adieu, dear friend!'

But Coppola cast several strange sidelong looks at Nathaniel and his room before taking his leave. The young man could still hear him laughing out loud on the stairase. 'All right,' Nathaniel muttered to himself, 'he's laughing at me because I no doubt paid far too much for the little looking-glass – paid far too much!' As he quietly whispered these words, a deep and terrible deathly groan resounded in the room. Nathaniel was so frightened he stopped breathing. But the groan had emanated from his own throat, he fathomed after the fact. 'Clara's quite right,' he said to himself, 'to take me for a ridiculous ghost-haunted idiot; it's perfectly insane – completely ridiculous of me to let the thought that I paid Coppola too much for the looking-glass unnerve me to such a degree; and for no reason at all.' Now he sat himself down to finish writing the letter to Clara, but a fleeting glance out of the window confirmed that Olympia was still seated there; and then and there, driven by an irresistible urge, he jumped up, grabbed Coppola's looking-glass and remained glued to the window, riveted by Olympia's alluring visage, until a friend and fellow student, Siegmund, called out to remind him that it was time to come along to Professor Spalanzani's lecture.

But the next day the curtain was pulled shut in that fateful room across the way, and he could not catch sight of Olympia on that day or on the following two days, despite the fact that he seldom left his own window and constantly kept peering over with Coppola's looking-glass. On the third day even the blinds were pulled. Desperately pining and driven by a burning desire, he ran out to her front door. Impressions of Olympia's lovely figure hung in the air everywhere he looked; she stepped out from behind the bushes and the reflection of her big, sparkling eyes beamed out at him from the clear brook. Clara's image had been totally erased from his heart, he thought of nothing but Olympia and wailed and complained at the top

of his voice: ‘Oh you, my shining star of love, did you appear before me only to vanish again and leave me in the dark and desperate night?’

As he was about to return to his room, he became aware of noisy goings-on in Spalanzani’s house. The doors were open, all kinds of devices were being carried in, the windows on the first floor were open wide, busy housemaids swept and dusted the window boxes with big brooms; inside, meanwhile, carpenters and decorators banged and hammered. Stunned, Nathaniel remained standing there in the street; then Siegmund came over to him and said, laughing: ‘So what do you say about our old Spalanzani?’ Nathaniel assured him that he had nothing to say since he knew absolutely nothing about the Professor, but that he was rather surprised to discover such a wild to-do and housekeeping frenzy in that ordinarily dark and silent house; whereupon Siegmund informed him that Spalanzani was going to throw a big party the next day, including a concert and ball, and that half the university was invited. The word was that Spalanzani was going to let his daughter Olympia, whom he’d fearfully kept sheltered from view, appear for the first time in public.

Nathaniel received an invitation and presented himself at the Professor’s at the appointed hour with a fast-beating heart, as carriages rolled up to the door and lights shimmered in the elegantly decorated rooms. The company was numerous and glamorous. Olympia appeared richly and tastefully attired. Everyone had to admire her finely chiselled face and graceful figure. The strange stoop of her back and her bone-thin waist appeared to be the consequence of a girdle tied too tight. There was a measured stiffness in her stance and step that some found displeasing; but that was ascribed to the stress of appearing in society. The concert began, Olympia played the grand piano with great skill and likewise brought off a bravura aria with a clear, almost bell-glass-like, pitch-perfect voice. Nathaniel was completely captivated; he stood in the last row and could not clearly make out Olympia’s features in the candlelight. Without attracting notice, he therefore pulled out Coppola’s looking-glass and gazed through its lens at the lovely Olympia. Oh God! He now fathomed how ardently she peered in his direction, how every note only seemed to sound enveloped in a loving look that surged through his burning heart. The artful trills rang out in Nathaniel’s ear like the heavenly Hosannas of the spirit transfigured by love; and when at last, following the cadenza, the long trill pierced the air all around him, feeling as though suddenly enveloped by her warm embrace, and no longer able to control himself, he cried out in rapture and pain: ‘Olympia!’ All heads turned to look at him, some laughing.

But the cathedral organist’s face twisted into an even dourer grimace than before and he merely remarked: ‘Well, well!’ The concert came to an end, the ball began. Only to dance with her – with *her*! That was now the object of Nathaniel’s deepest desire, all that he strove for; but how would he get up the courage to ask her, the queen of the evening, for a dance? Nevertheless – he himself had no idea how it happened – finding himself all of a sudden standing right there beside Olympia, once the music had already started up, and she not yet having been invited to dance, hardly able to stammer a few words, he reached for her hand. Olympia’s hand was ice-cold; he felt a terrible deathly frost surge through him; he looked into her eyes,

which greeted his gaze with love and longing, and at that very moment it was as if the pulse began to beat in her cold hand and the lifeblood began to glow warm within. And love's longing welled up, glowing hotter and hotter in Nathaniel's breast; he wrapped his arm around lovely Olympia and led her down the rows of dancers. He had always thought himself to be a good dancer, able to hold to the beat; but from the precise rhythmic steadiness of Olympia's step, which often caused him to falter, he soon fathomed the failing of his sense of beat. And yet he no longer wanted to dance with any other woman in the world, and felt as if he would have killed on the spot anyone else who dared approach her to ask for a dance. But this happened only twice, and thereafter, to his amazement, Olympia always remained seated between dances and he did not hesitate to reach for her hand and pull her up again and again.

Had Nathaniel had eyes for anything but the lovely Olympia, countless tussles and tangles would have been unavoidable; for clearly the quiet, painstakingly muffled laughter that emanated here and there among the groups of young people was directed at the lovely Olympia, whom they followed with the strangest looks – it was hard to say why. Fired up by the dance and by the wine of which he'd pleasantly partaken, Nathaniel shed his innate shyness. He sat beside Olympia, his hand in hers, and spoke fervently of his love for her in words that neither he nor she understood.

But she perhaps grasped their meaning; for she peered without flinching right into his eyes and sighed again and again: 'Oh – Oh – Oh!'

Whereupon Nathaniel replied: 'Oh you beautiful, heavenly woman! You ray of hope from the Promised Land of love – you deep spirit in which my entire being is mirrored,' and more of the same.

In response to which Olympia kept sighing the same 'Oh, Oh!'

Professor Spalanzani walked several times past the blissful pair and smiled with a strange look of satisfaction. And though Nathaniel's spirit hovered elsewhere in another world, all of a sudden it seemed to him as if it grew curiously dark down here below in Professor Spalanzani's house; he looked around and fathomed with a start that the last two lights in the empty hall were burning down to the wick and threatened at any moment to go out. Music and dance had stopped long ago. 'Time to part, time to part,' he cried out in a wild and desperate voice, kissed Olympia's hand and leant forward to kiss her on the mouth with his burning lips, but her lips were ice-cold! And, just as when he'd first touched Olympia's cold hand, he felt a shudder run through him, the legend of the dead bride suddenly flashing through his mind; but Olympia pressed him tightly to her, and in that kiss her lips seemed to come alive with warmth. Professor Spalanzani paced slowly through the empty hall; his steps sounded muffled and, ringed by dancing shadows, his figure appeared terrifying and ghostlike. 'Do you love me – do you love me, Olympia? Just that one word! Do you love me?' whispered Nathaniel.

But, standing up, Olympia only sighed: 'Oh! Oh!'

'Oh yes, my precious, my beautiful star of love,' said Nathaniel, 'you rose in the firmament of my heart and will evermore light up and transfigure the darkness

within!'

'Oh, Oh!' Olympia responded, walking away.

Nathaniel followed her; they stood before the Professor. 'You chatted up my daughter in a right sprightly manner,' he said with a smile. 'Well then, my dear Mr Nathaniel, if conversing with the simple-minded girl gives you pleasure, you're welcome to visit whenever you like.'

Nathaniel staggered off starry-eyed, with all of heaven's splendour bursting from his breast. Spalanzani's party was the talk of the town in the days that followed. Notwithstanding the Professor's great pains to make it a splendid occasion, the chatterboxes nevertheless dwelt on all sorts of unseemly and strange goings-on, saving their sharpest barbs for the stiff and silent Olympia, who, despite her lovely exterior, was saddled by the wagging tongues with a lot of completely nonsensical notions as to her sanity – the reason, it was said, that Spalanzani kept her hidden for so long. Needless to say, Nathaniel was not pleased to learn of this, and he said nothing; what was the point, he reasoned, in proving to these dullards that it was their own nonsense that kept them from recognizing Olympia's profound and beautiful spirit!

'I beg you, my friend,' Siegmund said to him one day, 'tell me how in heaven's name an intelligent man like you ever fell for the wax face of that wooden doll?'

Nathaniel was about to explode in anger, but then he pulled himself together and calmly responded: 'Why don't *you* tell me, brother Siegmund, how a fellow with an eye for beauty could be blind to Olympia's heavenly charms? But then again, it's just as well fate didn't make you a rival; for one of us would have to fall in blood.'

Fathoming how things stood with his friend, Siegmund backed off and, after observing that in matters of beauty and love all is in the eye of the beholder, he added: 'Still it's funny that so many of us feel pretty much the same way about Olympia. She seemed to us – don't take it badly, my friend! – strangely stiff and soulless. Her figure's regular, just like her face, it's true! She might well be considered beautiful, if her gaze were not so devoid of life, so totally lacking, you might say, the power of sight. Her step is strangely measured, every movement seems prescribed by clockwork gears and cogs. Her playing and singing have the unpleasantly precise soulless rhythm of a machine, which is true of her dance step too. This Olympia seemed completely odd to us, we didn't know how to take her; it was as if she were only acting like a living being, and yet she unquestionably has her own way about her.'

Nathaniel refused to give in to the bitter feelings that welled up in his heart at Siegmund's words. He checked his mood and simply replied, deadly serious: 'Olympia may indeed seem odd to you cold, prosaic types. The poetic temperament only reveals itself to like-minded souls! Her loving look fell on *me* alone, lighting up my senses and thoughts; only in Olympia's love can I find myself again. You all think ill of her because she doesn't babble banalities like all the other shallow souls. It's true, she speaks little; but those few words seem like true hieroglyphs revealing an inner world replete with love and a profound intellectual grasp of the eternal beyond. But you just don't understand, all these words are lost on you.'

‘Beware, my brother,’ said Siegmund very softly, almost sadly, ‘it seems to me you’re heading in a dangerous direction. You can count on me, if all else – no, I dare not say any more!’ Nathaniel suddenly fathomed that the cold, prosaic Siegmund was being very sincere with him, and so he took and shook the proffered hand with all his heart.

Nathaniel had completely forgotten that there was a Clara in this world whom he once loved; his mother, Lothar, everyone had slipped from his consciousness, he only lived for Olympia, beside whom he sat for hours every day, and to whom he held forth on his love, on a life flushed with sympathy, on their psychic affinity – to all of which Olympia listened with deep devotion. From the depths of his desk drawers Nathaniel fetched out everything he had ever written. Poems, fantasies, visions, novels, stories, to which were added daily all sorts of high-flown sonnets, stanzas, *canzone* – all of it he tirelessly read to Olympia for hours on end.

But he had never had such a lovely listener. She did not embroider and knit, she did not peer out of the window, she fed no birds, she played with no lapdogs or cuddly cats, she practised no paper-cutting or did anything else with her hands, she held back no furtive yawns with a quiet, forced cough – in short, for hours and hours she peered with a fixed and steady gaze into the eye of her beloved without fidgeting or budging, and her gaze grew ever livelier and more intense. Only when Nathaniel finally stood up and kissed her on the hand, and even on the mouth, did she respond: ‘Oh, oh!’ Followed with: ‘Good night, my dear!’

‘Oh you beautiful, oh you profound spirit,’ Nathaniel cried out when he reached his room, ‘only you, you alone completely understand me.’ He experienced an inner bliss when he pondered what a wondrous harmony manifested itself ever more each day between his and Olympia’s spirits; for it seemed to him as if Olympia had grasped his works, his poetic gift, from the depths of her soul, indeed that her voice came from the bottom of her innermost self. That must be true, he thought; for Olympia never uttered any more words than those already noted above. But when, at his most lucid moments, for instance in the morning upon waking, Nathaniel really pondered Olympia’s total passivity and laconic manner, he shrugged it off: ‘What are words – words! Her heavenly gaze says more than any hollow language. Can any child of heaven fit herself into the narrow compass of a pitiful earthly need?’

Professor Spalanzani seemed to be absolutely delighted by the relationship between his daughter and Nathaniel; he gave them all sorts of unequivocal signs of his approval and when Nathaniel finally dared to allude to a future bond with Olympia, a smile spread over Spalanzani’s face and he replied that he would leave it to his daughter to decide of her own free will. Emboldened by these words, with burning desire in his heart, Nathaniel decided to implore Olympia the very next day to declare clearly in plain words what her dear loving look had long since told him, that she wished to be his for evermore. He searched for the ring that his mother had given him when he left home to give to Olympia as a symbol of his commitment to their budding, blossoming life together. While looking for it he happened on Clara’s and Lothar’s letters; indifferent, he flung them aside, found the ring, stuffed it in his

pocket and ran over to see Olympia.

Even from the doorstep, and from the vestibule, he heard a strange din; it appeared to emanate from Spalanzani's study. A stamping of feet – a clatter – a shoving – a pounding on the door, interspersed with coarse words and hurled imprecations. 'Let go! Let me go! You wretch! You cursed creature! Did I put my life and limb on the line for that?' – 'Ha ha ha ha! – that was not our arrangement – it was me, me who made the eyes!' – 'And I the mechanical clockwork!' – 'Poor devil with your clockwork – you filthy cur of a simple-minded clockmaker!' – 'Get out! – Satan! – Stop!' – 'Organ grinder!' – 'Devilish beast! – Stop – Get out – Let go!' It was the voices of Spalanzani and that disgusting Coppelius that screeched and raged.

Nathaniel burst in, gripped by an unspeakable terror. The Professor held a female figure by the shoulders, the Italian Coppola held her by the feet; they tugged and tore her here and there, furiously fighting for possession. Nathaniel recoiled in profound horror when he recognized the figure as Olympia; flaring up in a wild fit of anger, he was about to tear his beloved out of their struggling grip – but at that very moment, with a mighty burst of strength, Coppola managed to yank the figure free of the Professor's hands and, with a pivot, swinging her in his direction, managed to land Nathaniel such a stunning blow that it made him tumble backwards over the work table, toppling and knocking down the phials, retorts, bottles and measuring glasses. All the equipment smashed in a thousand pieces on the floor. Then Coppola flung the figure over his shoulder and raced with a repulsive, shrill laugh down the steps, so that the ugly dangling feet of the figure banged with a wooden thud and thump on the steps. Stunned, Nathaniel stood up – he had seen all too clearly that Olympia's deathly pallid wax face had no eyes, but black hollows in their stead; she was a lifeless doll.

Spalanzani thrashed around on the floor; glass shards had cut his head, chest and arms, blood spurted as though from a fountain. But he pulled himself together. 'After him – after him – why do you waver? Coppelius – Coppelius has robbed me of my finest automaton – twenty years' work – life and limb invested – the clockwork – speech – step – all mine – the eyes – the eyes robbed from you. Cursed hellhound! After him – fetch me back Olympia – there are her eyes!'

Then Nathaniel spotted a pair of bloody eyes peering at him from the floor. Spalanzani grasped them with his uninjured hand and flung them at him so that they struck him on the breast. Then madness grabbed him with its burning claws and bored its way into his heart of hearts, tearing his thinking and feeling to shreds. 'Hopla – hopla – hopla! – ring of fire – ring of fire! Spin around, ring of fire – merrily – merrily! – wooden doll, hopla, lovely little wooden doll – turn turn!' – whereupon he flung himself at the Professor and pressed his fingers to his throat. He would have strangled him, but, roused by the racket, many people stormed in, tore the raging Nathaniel from the Professor's neck, managed to revive the old man and thereby saved his life. As strong as he was, Siegmund was not able to restrain the madman, who kept on screaming in a terrifying voice: 'Wooden doll, turn, turn!' and lashed about him with balled fists. Finally, it took the combined strength of

many men to overpower him, fling him to the floor and tie him up. His words dissolved in a terrible beastly bellowing. In this pitiful state, still raving in a ghastly frenzy, he was taken to the madhouse.

But before I continue, gracious reader, with my account of the fate of that poor unfortunate, Nathaniel, those of you who took an interest in the masterful mechanic and maker of automatons, Spalanzani, can rest assured that he completely recuperated from his wounds. He was forced to leave the university, as Nathaniel's story had stirred up a public uproar and it was commonly held to be an altogether fraudulent swindle to try to pass off a wooden doll for a living person in proper society (for Olympia had effectively pulled the wool over their eyes). Jurists went so far as to call it a refined, and, therefore, all the harder to punish, swindle, which he succeeded in pulling off so skilfully that everyone (except for a few sharp-eyed students) was taken in, although they now put on a smart façade and pointed out all sorts of things that seemed suspicious to them at the time. But such smart-alecs ultimately brought no hard and fast evidence to the case. For instance, could it possibly have aroused anyone's suspicion that, according to the testimony of one elegant invitee, Olympia more often sneezed than yawned? This, maintained said elegant invitee, was the automaton's hidden rewind mechanism that noticeably creaked in the process, etc.

A professor of poetry and rhetoric took a pinch of snuff, snapped the tin shut, cleared his throat and launched into his erudite discourse: 'Most honoured ladies and gentlemen, can't you see where the shoe pinches? The whole thing is an allegory – a long-drawn-out metaphor! You catch my drift! *Sapienti sat!*'

But many honoured gentlemen derived little consolation from this view; the story of the automaton had taken root and a dreadful distrust of human figures seeped into their souls. In order to be completely convinced that they were not in love with a wooden doll, quite a few lovers demanded that their beloved sing something off-key and dance out of step, that they embroider and knit while being read to, play with Bowser, etc., and above all that they not just listen, but also occasionally say something in such a way as to demonstrate that their words necessarily derive from actual thought and feeling. Consequently the loving bond of many couples grew stronger and all the more attractive, but others quietly drifted apart. 'One can hardly be held accountable for this,' was the common excuse. Yawning was all the rage at social teas, but people refrained from sneezing, so as to dispel any suspicions. Spalanzani was obliged to leave the town, as has already been said, to escape the criminal investigation into his fraudulent introduction of an automaton into human society. Coppola also vanished.

When Nathaniel awakened, as though from an oppressive and terrible dream, he batted his eyes open and felt himself infused with an indescribable sense of well-being and heavenly warmth. He lay in his bed in his room in his father's house; Clara was bent over him and his mother and Lothar stood close by.

'At last, at last, oh my dearly beloved Nathaniel, you've pulled through at last, and now you're mine again!' Clara spoke the words with all her heart and took Nathaniel in her arms.

But bright, burning tears of sadness and rapture poured from his eyes and he moaned deeply: ‘My Clara, my Clara!’ Siegmund, who had faithfully stood by his friend in dire moments, entered the room. Nathaniel held out his hand: ‘You, my faithful brother in need, you never abandoned me.’

Every last trace of madness was gone, and soon Nathaniel got better in the painstaking care of his mother, his beloved and his friends. Fortune had in the meantime returned to the house; for a miserly old uncle, from whom no one hoped to inherit a penny, had died and left Nathaniel’s mother, in addition to a considerable fortune, a small estate in a pleasant district not far from the city. There they intended to move together, mother, Nathaniel with his Clara, whom he now planned to marry, and Lothar. Nathaniel had become more gentle and childlike than ever and only now really recognized Clara’s heavenly pure, radiant spirit. No one reminded him, not even breathing the slightest hint, of the recent past.

It was only when Siegmund prepared to leave that Nathaniel spoke up: ‘By God, my brother, I was heading down the path of no return, but in the nick of time an angel made me find the right way! It was my Clara, after all!’ Siegmund cut him off, fearing that bitter memories might once again make him start raving.

The time approached when the four happy people planned to move out to the small country estate. At midday they went walking through the streets of the city, having bought some things. The tall town hall tower cast a long shadow over the market place. ‘Oh!’ said Clara, ‘let’s climb it one last time and gaze out at the distant mountains!’ No sooner said than done! Nathaniel and Clara both climbed the steps, mother went home with the maid, and Lothar, who was disinclined to mount the many steps, stayed down below. Now the two lovers stood arm in arm at the tower’s highest lookout gallery and peered at the sweet-scented ring of woods, beyond which the blue mountains loomed like a giant city.

‘Will you look at that strange little grey bush that seems to be slowly drawing near?’ asked Clara.

Nathaniel mechanically reached into his coat pocket; he found Coppola’s looking-glass and turned it sideways. There was Clara standing in the eye of the lens. A spasmodic quiver started up in his veins and arteries – turning deathly pale, he peered at Clara, but soon sparks of fire flashed from his rolling eyes; he let out a horrible cry like a hunted animal, jumped high in the air and with a curious cackle proceeded to scream out shrilly: ‘Turn, little wooden doll, turn!’ – and with a great burst of strength he grabbed hold of Clara and tried to hurl her off the balcony, but Clara clung for dear life to the metal railing.

Hearing the madman raving and Clara’s terrified screams, and gripped by a terrible foreboding, Lothar clambered up the stairs, but the door to the second flight of steps was locked. Clara’s piteous screams sounded louder and louder. Consumed with anger and fear, Lothar hurled himself against the door, which finally gave way.

Clara’s cries grew fainter and fainter: ‘Help! Save me! Save me!’ till her voice went silent.

‘She’s done for – murdered by that madman,’ Lothar screamed. The door to the lookout gallery was also locked. Desperation turned him into a lion; he broke down

the door. God in heaven! Clara dangled in Nathaniel's mad grip over the edge of the railing, only holding on to the cast-iron railing by one hand. Quick as lightning, Lothar grabbed his sister, pulled her to safety and at the very same moment heaved a balled fist into the madman's face so that he tumbled backwards and let go of his prey.

Lothar raced back down the steps, his unconscious sister in his arms. She was saved. Meanwhile, Nathaniel kept flailing about on the lookout gallery and jumped high in the air and cried: 'Ring of fire, turn! Ring of fire, turn!'

Aroused by the screams, a throng gathered below, including the lawyer Coppelius, who had just come to town and made straight for the market place. Some people wanted to climb the tower to capture the madman, whereupon Coppelius laughed and said: 'Ha ha, just be patient, he'll be down shortly on his own initiative!' and looked on as the others raced up the steps.

Nathaniel suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. He leant down, spotted Coppelius below and with a shrill shriek – 'Ha! Eyes a pretty! Eyes a pretty!' – he leapt over the parapet. As Nathaniel landed, his skull smashed on the cobblestones, while Coppelius disappeared in the crowd.

Some years later Clara was said to have been spotted in some distant town seated, hand in hand with a friendly man on a bench before the door of a lovely little country house, two bouncing boys playing at her feet. It might, therefore, be fair to suppose that Clara finally found the quiet domestic bliss that suited her cheerful, life-loving spirit and that Nathaniel in his torn and troubled state could never have given her.

Rune Mountain

1804

Ludwig Tieck

A young hunter sat lost in thought before a bird trap in a remote mountain hollow, listening to the rush of water and the rustle of the forest in the solitude of the wild. He pondered his fate, having at an early age forsaken his father and mother, the cosy comforts of home and all the friends from his village to seek out strange surroundings in which to escape the ever-reoccurring cycle of the ordinary; and he looked around him now somewhat surprised to find himself in this valley, yet again engaged in the same pursuit. Fat clouds floated through the sky, disappearing behind the mountains, birds sang in the bushes and an echo replied. Slowly he climbed down the mountain and sat himself on the bank of a brook that bubbled, foaming, over the protruding rock. He listened to the ever-changing melody of the water, and it seemed to him as though the rippling current whispered in an unintelligible tongue a thousand things he absolutely needed to know, and he felt a deep sadness at his failure to understand. Then he looked around again and this time he felt a sudden burst of joy; whereupon he took heart and sang out loud a hunting song:

Gay and giddy, midst stones walking
Goes the youth in hot pursuit,
Ever watchful, his prey stalking
Slinking, thinking, never talking
Till the hunt bears fruit.

Heed the bark of faithful hounds
In the blessed solitude.
Answer with the horn’s sweet sound,
Hear the heart so quickly pound,
Hunting is beatitude!

Home is in the chasm hollow,
Every tree a friendly face,
Heavens, let the wild winds bellow,
Bringing buck and roe to follow,
After hoof let swift foot race.

Leave the farmer to his tilling,
Let the sailor keep his tides,
No one greets dawn with such feeling,
No one sees Diana kneeling
In the dew drops where she hides.

Only he who hunting goes
Ever saw the goddess smile
With a face that makes his heart glow,

Never more will he such love know,
Longing for her in the wild.

As he sang, the sun went down and long shadows fell over the narrow valley. A cooling darkness spilt over the ground, and only the tops of the trees and the rounded mountain peaks were still illumined by the glow of night.

Christian's mood grew ever sadder; he had no desire to return to his bird traps, yet neither did he wish to remain where he was; he felt so lonely and longed for human company. Now he hankered after his father's old books, which he had always refused to read every time his father urged him to do so; scenes from childhood sprang to mind, the games he played with little friends, the schoolhouse that had felt so oppressive to him, and he longed to be back in all those places he had wilfully left behind to find his fortune in unknown climes, in mountains and among strange people, to seek out a new pursuit.

As it grew darker, and the brook bubbled louder, and the birds of night took flight to begin their mad wanderings, he still stayed seated at the same spot, feeling despondent, all his thoughts turning inward; he wanted to cry and he hadn't the vaguest idea of what to do or what task to take up next. He thoughtlessly plucked a protruding root from the ground, and was suddenly startled to hear a dim whimper that swelled in the earth down below him into a mournful wail, and only faded sadly in the distance. The sound swept through his heart of hearts, it gripped him as though he had unsuspectingly touched the wound through which the dying body of nature painfully sought to give up the ghost. He jumped up and wanted to run away, for he had already heard of the curious root of the mandrake which, when torn out, gives off such heart-rending sounds that a man can go mad listening to its whine. As he made ready to leave, a stranger came up from behind, smiled at him in a friendly manner and asked where he wanted to go. Christian had longed for human company, and yet he once again shrank back with fear at this friendly presence.

'Where are you rushing off to?' the stranger asked again.

The young hunter tried to pull himself together and told him how, suddenly overwhelmed by loneliness, he wanted to run away, as the evening had grown so dark, the green shadows of the trees so sad, the brook bubbled so balefully and the passing clouds drew his longings to the far side of the mountains.

'You're still young,' the stranger said, 'and can't yet abide the rigours of solitude. I'd best keep you company for a while, since you won't find a house or a village within a mile of here. We might as well chat along the way and tell each other stories, it'll chase away your dark thoughts; in an hour's time the moon will rise from behind the mountain, its light will lighten up your soul.'

They set out together, and soon the stranger seemed to the young man like an old acquaintance. 'What brought you to these mountains?' the stranger asked. 'Judging from the way you speak, you're not from hereabouts.'

'There's more than a mouthful I could tell you,' said the young man, 'but it's hardly worth relating, not the stuff of a story. Drawn, as if by some strange force, away from the circle of my parents and relations, my spirit wanted to escape; like a bird caught in a net trying in vain to break free, my soul was consumed by all sorts

of odd fantasies and desires. We lived far from here on a plain with no mountains for miles about and hardly a hill in sight; few trees graced the green plain, but meadows, fertile fields of grain and gardens stretched as far as the eye could see, and a great river glimmered like a mighty spirit rushing past the meadows and fields. My father was a gardener in the castle and intended to train me to take up the same pursuit; he loved plants and flowers more than anything else and could spend days on end tirelessly tending to their care and cultivation. Indeed, he went so far as to maintain that he could almost talk to them: he learnt their language from their growth and blossoming as well as from the different forms and colours of their leaves. I found the work in the garden loathsome, all the more so as my father tried to talk me into it and even to force me with threats. I wanted to become a fisherman and tried it out, but the solitary life on the water didn't suit me either; I was then apprenticed to a shopkeeper in town, but soon returned to my father's house. Then one day I heard my father talk about the mountains he had visited in his youth, of the underground mines and the miners, of the hunters and their life, and suddenly this pressing drive stirred in me, this feeling that I had found the life that best suited me.

'Day and night I mused and pictured high mountain peaks, deep chasms and evergreen forests; my imagination fashioned colossal cliffs, I heard in my fantasies the hubbub of the hunt, the blast of hunting horns and the yapping of dogs and game; I dreamt of nothing else, and the constant thought of it robbed me of peace and rest. The flat plain, the castle, my father's little walled garden with its well-ordered flower beds, the cramped house, the sky that stretched so sadly all around, and not a groundswell, not a proper promontory for miles about – all this became more and more depressing and hateful. It seemed to me as if all the people around me lived in pitiful ignorance, and that all of them would think and feel as I did if only for a fleeting instant they were struck by an awareness of their misery.

'Consumed by such thoughts, I brooded until one fine morning I resolved to leave my parents' house for ever. I had read in a book of the nearest big mountain, saw illustrations of some of its corners and planned my way accordingly. It was in early spring and I felt altogether happy and light-hearted.

'I hurried along in order to leave the plain behind me as soon as possible, and one evening I saw the dark outlines of the mountains rearing in the distance before me. I could hardly sleep at the inn where I was staying, so impatient was I to reach the region I thought to be my true homeland; I startled awake early and was once again on my way. By afternoon I had already reached my beloved mountains and, reeling like a drunk, just stood still for a while, peered behind me and let myself get giddy at the sight of all the strange, and yet oh so familiar, surroundings.

'Soon the plain disappeared from view and the forest streams came surging towards me. Beech and oak trees shook their shaggy manes over steep precipices; my path led me past dizzying abysses, blue peaks loomed tall and proud in the background. A new world revealed itself to me, and I did not grow tired of its charms. So after a few days' walking, during which I traversed much of the craggy terrain, I met up with an old woodsman who, heeding my urgent pleas, took me

under his wing and taught me the art of hunting. I spent three months in his service. I took possession of this rugged country in which I roamed as if it were my kingdom; I got to know every cliff and every ravine; I was happy in my element when early in the morning we set out for the forest, when we chopped down trees, when I trained my eye and my musket on a fleeting target, and when I helped train our trusted comrades, the dogs, to track down game. I've been seated for some eight days now setting bird traps up here on the loneliest ledge, and this evening I felt sadder than I ever had in my life, I felt so lost, so completely forlorn, and I still can't get over the feeling.'

The stranger had listened attentively as both wandered along a dark path in the forest. Now they came out into a clearing, and the crescent moon that hung over the mountain top greeted them with a friendly burst of light. The cleft rock reared before them, with all its strange forms and various and sundry masses mysteriously melded in the pale glimmer of light, a steep peak looming in the distance atop which ancient crumbling ruins gave off an eerie aura. 'Our ways part here,' said the stranger, 'I'm heading down there, my house is in the hollow; the ore in the rock is my neighbour, the mountain streams tell me wondrous things at night; that's not where you're going. But look at yon Rune Mountain with its steep cliffs, how lovely and invitingly it gazes down at us! Have you never been there?'

'Never,' said young Christian, 'though I once heard the old woodsman tell wondrous things about that mountain, which, foolishly enough, I promptly forgot; but I do recall that on that evening I was filled with dread. I would like to climb it once, for the light is loveliest up there, the grass must be greener than green, and the world around it different from anywhere else; and it may well be that up there you can still find miracles of old.'

'You're almost certain to succeed,' the stranger replied, 'if you know how to look; he whose heart is deeply drawn to it will find old friends there and abundant beauty, all that you could possibly wish for.' With these words, the stranger swiftly set out on his descent without bidding his companion farewell. He soon disappeared in the thicket, and shortly thereafter even the sound of his footsteps passed out of earshot.

The young hunter was not surprised; he just redoubled his steps to Rune Mountain. Everything drew him there, the stars seemed to shimmer in that direction, the moon seemed to light the way up to the ruins, light clouds wafted upwards and the rivers and rustling forests below emboldened him in his resolve. His steps seemed to fly, his heart beat fast, he felt such a burst of joy that it soon welled up into a tumult of disquiet. He came to parts he'd never been to; the cliffs grew steeper, the verdure vanished, the bare walls of rock beckoned, calling out to him with raging voices, and a lonesome wailing wind whipped him ever onwards.

Scurrying along in this way without stopping, long after midnight he reached a narrow ledge hard on the edge of an abyss. He ignored the dizzying depths that yawned beneath him and threatened at any moment to swallow him up, so much was he consumed by his mad imaginings and incomprehensible desires. Now the perilous path pulled him up against a high wall of rock that seemed to dissolve in

the clouds; his foothold grew narrower with every step, and the young man had to hold fast to protruding rocks to keep from falling. Finally he couldn't go any further. The path ended under a window; he had to stop dead in his tracks and didn't know whether to turn around or stay where he was.

Suddenly he saw a light that seemed to move behind the old rampart. He followed the glimmer with his gaze and found that he could see into a spacious old hall wondrously adorned with all kinds of stones and crystals that cast multicoloured flickering reflections, which were strangely scattered all about by the moving light carried by a large female figure walking back and forth lost in thought. She did not appear to be a mortal, so big and strong were her limbs, so stern was her expression; and yet the enchanted young man thought that he had never seen or imagined such loveliness. He trembled and secretly wished that she would come to the window and notice him. She finally stopped moving, set the light down on a crystal table, looked upwards and sang with a piercing voice:

Where do the old ones bide,
Why do they not reply?
When sparkling crystals cry,
And from diamond-studded columns high
Tears a secret sadness belie?
And murmurings do secrets tickle
From the water's crystalline trickle,
Swelling, so it seems,
Into the stuff of dreams.
Come then, you spirits all
Into the golden hall,
And raise from dark dell
Heads that sparkle,
Rise up and stand tall!
We have languished so long
With our tear-filled song,
Spirits, take us in your thrall!

Upon finishing the song she started to undress and laid her clothes in a costly chest. First she took a golden veil from her head, whereupon her thick black curly hair spilt down to her hips; then she removed the garment covering her bosom, and the young man forgot himself and the world at the sight of her heavenly beauty. He hardly dared breathe as she removed layer upon layer; and naked at last, she strode up and down the hall and her thick mane of curls formed a dark wavy sea, out of which the various curving shapes of her pure white body, glimmering like marble, emanated in turn.

After a while she approached another golden chest, took out a tablet that glimmered with many inlaid stones, rubies, diamonds and all sort of jewels, and peered at it long and hard. The tablet made an unimaginable magical impression with its various colours and lines; at times the young man was painfully blinded by the shimmer that shot in his direction, then again green and blue shimmers soothed the ache in his eyes; but he just stood there, taking everything in with his gaze and at the same time completely turned in upon himself. In his mind's eye he saw and sensed a gaping abyss of figures and harmonious sounds, of longing and desire, hordes of winged notes of melancholy and merry melodies flooded his

consciousness, moved him to the core; he saw a world of hope and pain open before him, soaring magic cliffs of confidence and defiant trust, great waterfalls gushing with woefulness.

He no longer recognized himself and was startled when the beauty opened the window, handed him the magic stone tablet and uttered these few words: ‘Take this to remember me by!’ He took hold of the tablet and felt its form, which immediately passed unnoticed into his innermost self, and the light and the powerful beauty and the strange hall vanished. All these impressions he took into himself like a dark night with cloud curtains, and, trying to retrieve his fleeting feelings, his sense of enchantment and incomprehensible love, he looked over the precious tablet in which the setting moon left a faint and bluish reflection.

He still held the tablet pressed tightly in his hands as day broke and, exhausted, dizzy and half asleep, he tumbled down the steep incline.

The sun shone full in the face of the dazed sleeper, who, waking, found himself lying on a lovely hill. He looked around and saw far behind him the ruins on Rune Mountain, hardly still recognizable on the far horizon: he searched for that tablet but couldn’t find it anywhere. Stunned and confused, he tried to pull himself together and retrieve his recent recollections, but his memory was all muddled, like a dense fog in which formless figures moved wildly and imperceptibly about.

His entire former life lay as though in the far distance behind him; the strange and the ordinary were so jumbled together that he found it impossible to tell them apart. Hesitating, following a long dispute with himself, he finally came to the conclusion that it was a dream or a sudden madness that took hold of him that night, but he still could not fathom how he could have strayed such a distance in this unknown region. Still half punch-drunk with sleep, he climbed down the hill and happened on a beaten path that led down the mountain and back into the plain.

Everything seemed strange to him. At first he thought he’d end up in his native clime, but the region looked completely different and he finally suspected that he must have arrived beyond the southern rim of the mountain chain, the north face of which he had climbed the previous spring. Come noon he stood outside a village from whose huts smoke rose peacefully overhead. Children in festive attire were playing on the village green, and from a little church he heard an organ’s chime and the voices of the congregation singing. It all struck him with an indescribable sweet wistfulness, everything moved him so profoundly he wanted to cry. The narrow gardens, the little huts with their smoking chimneys, the evenly divided fields of grain reminded him of the neediness of the poor human species, of its dependence on the friendly soil, in whose indulgence it must trust; all the while the singing and the sound of the organ filled his heart with a piety he had never felt before.

His sensations and desires of the night before now seemed dissolute and sacrilegious to him; he felt a childlike, humble and burning need to be in contact with people again, brother to brother, and to disassociate himself from all his godless feelings and intentions. The flat plain with its little river that, in its twists and turns, lapped up against meadows and gardens, looked delightful and alluring; thinking back with dread to the time he’d spent in the lonely mountains and among

the bare rocks, he longed to be allowed to live in this peaceful village and, so inclined, entered the crowded church.

The singing had just come to an end and the priest had begun his sermon about God's beneficence in the harvest: how His goodness fed and satiated every living thing, how wonderfully well the fertile fields of grain were conceived to preserve mankind, how God's love was ever manifest in our daily bread, and so the devout Christian could gratefully celebrate an everlasting supper.

The congregation was moved. The hunter's gaze fell on the pious speaker and noticed a young girl seated close by the pulpit who seemed to be more devout and attentive than everyone else. She was slender and blonde, her blue eyes glimmered with the most penetrating softness, her face was as though translucent and flushed with the most delicate colours. The young stranger had never felt such feelings in his heart, to be at once so full of love and so calm, so receptive to the slightest and most exhilarating emotions. He bowed in tears as the priest finally said the blessing; hearing the holy words he felt himself as though infused with an invisible force, and shadowy memories of the night were swept from his mind and pressed into the far distant corners of consciousness. He walked out of the church, lingered a while under a great linden tree and in a fervent prayer, undeserving though he was, thanked God for having freed him again from the snares of the evil spirit.

The village celebrated the harvest festival that day and everybody was in a cheerful mood. The children in their Sunday best couldn't wait for the dances and the cakes, the young bucks decorated the saplings that ringed the village square in preparation for the autumnal festivity, the musicians were already seated, tuning their instruments. Christian retreated again to the field to compose himself and gather his observations, whereupon he returned to the village to find everything ready for the festival and the merriment under way. Lovely blonde Elisabeth was there too with her parents, and the stranger mingled with the merry crowd. Elisabeth danced, and in the meantime he had already struck up a conversation with her father, a farmer and one of the richest men in the town. The stranger's youth and his words seemed to please the older man, and so it didn't take them long to agree that Christian would move into his house to work as his gardener. The young man dared try his hand at it, for he hoped the very skills and tasks he had so scorned back home would come back to him now.

He began a new life. He moved in with the farmer and became part of the family; with his new standing he also changed his bearing. He was so able, so obliging and always friendly, and he worked so diligently, that he soon won over everyone in the house, especially the daughter. Every time he saw her setting off for church on Sundays he had a lovely bouquet of flowers ready, for which she thanked him with a broad smile, blushing red; he missed her when a day went by and he hadn't seen her, and evenings she soothed his heart with fairy tales and funny stories. They grew more and more attached to each other, and the old folk, who noticed it, didn't seem to mind, for Christian was the most diligent and handsome young man in the village; they themselves had felt an immediate fondness and bond of friendship for him from the start. Within six months Elisabeth was his betrothed. It was spring

again and the swallows and songbirds had returned, the garden was resplendent and the wedding was celebrated with great merriment. Bride and groom seemed drunk with happiness. Late that evening, when they retired to their room, the young husband said to his beloved: ‘No, you are not that image that once enthralled me in a dream and which I can never completely forget, but I am happy when I’m near you and blissful in your arms.’

How glad the family was when the following year a little daughter named Leanore was added to their number. At times, it’s true, Christian grew a bit more serious at the sight of the child, but he always regained his youthful high spirits. He hardly ever gave a thought to his former way of life, as he felt himself completely at home and content here. But after several months he thought of his parents, how happy his father, in particular, would be to see him a gardener and farmer; it troubled him to think that he could have forgotten his father and mother for so long. His only child reminded him what a joy children bring their parents, and so he finally decided to set out to visit his native village again.

Reluctantly he took leave of his wife; everyone wished him good fortune, and one bright sunny spring day he set out on foot. Within a few hours he already felt how much parting pained him, and for the first time in his life he suffered pangs of separation; all the strange surroundings seemed almost wild, it felt as if he had lost his way in a hostile solitude. Then it occurred to him that his youth was over, that he had found a homeland to which he belonged and in which his heart had put down roots; he was beginning to lament the lost foolishness of the previous year, and stopping at a village inn for the night depressed him no end. He could not fathom what in heaven’s name had driven him to leave his kind-hearted wife and the dear in-laws he had inherited, and, sulky and grumbling, the next morning he set out again to continue his journey.

The closer he got to the mountains the more fearful he grew. The distant ruins came into view and their outline became clearer and clearer, many a rounded peak rearing up out of the blue fog. His pace grew halting; many times he stopped dead in his tracks, taken aback by his fear, by the mounting terror that closed in upon him with every step. ‘How well do I know you, madness,’ he cried out, ‘you and your perilous allure, but I’m a man and I will resist you! Elisabeth is no pipe dream; I know that she’s thinking of me now, that she’s waiting for me and lovingly counting the hours of my absence. Don’t I already see forests waving like black hair before me? Don’t the flashing eyes of the stream peer after me? Are the mighty limbs of the mountain not marching towards me?’

Having uttered these words aloud, he was about to fling himself down beneath a tree to rest when he spotted an old man seated in its shade, studying a flower with the greatest attentiveness, now holding it up to the sun, now shading it with his hand, counting its petals, taking great pains to engrave a vivid picture of it in his memory. As Christian came closer, the face seemed so very familiar, and soon there was no doubt in his mind that the old man with the flower was his father. He fell into his arms with a look of profound joy; his father was pleased but not surprised suddenly to see him again. ‘Did you set out to see me, my son?’ the old man said. ‘I

knew that I would soon find you again, but I didn't think that I would have that satisfaction on this very day.'

'But, father, how did you know that you would run into me?'

'The flower told me,' the old gardener said, 'my whole life I've wanted to see it just once, but I never had the good luck, because it's very rare and only grows in the mountains. I set out to search for you, because your mother died and the loneliness at home became too sad and suffocating. I had no idea which direction to take, but finally I wandered through the mountains, as depressing as the journey was; and all the while I looked for the flower, but I couldn't find it anywhere, and now I stumbled on it unexpectedly where the highlands level off into the lovely plain; that's how I knew that I was bound to find you again soon – and see, it happened, just as the dear flower predicted it would!' They hugged again, and Christian wept over his mother; but the old man took his hand and said: 'Let's be off, so that we soon shed the awful shadow of the mountains, my heart still aches on account of the steep, wild shapes that rear up suddenly, the terrible abysses, the desperate lament of the streams; it's high time we returned to the good, pious plain.'

So they journeyed, and Christian was happy again. He told his father of his recent good fortune, of his child and his new home; his own words made him giddy, and, in speaking, he first fathomed that nothing was lacking in his perfect contentment. And so, swapping sad and joyous stories, they came at last to the village. Everyone was happy that the journey had ended so soon, most of all Elisabeth. The old father moved in with them and pooled his modest savings with the household reserves; they were the picture of happiness and harmony. Their fields were fertile, their livestock multiplied and it wasn't long before Christian's house became one of the most stately in town; and soon he was the father of several children.

Five happy years went by, when a stranger who happened to be passing through the village stopped and asked to be put up at Christian's house, as it was the loveliest to look at. He was a friendly, talkative man who played with the children and gave them presents and soon won everyone over. He liked it there so much that he wanted to spend a couple of days, but the days turned into weeks and then months. No one was surprised at his extended stay, for people grew so accustomed to his presence that they counted him a member of the family. But Christian often sat wondering; for it seemed to him as if he already knew the traveller from somewhere in the past, and yet he could recall no occasion on which he might have met him. After three months the stranger finally packed up his things and said: 'Dear friends, a wondrous destiny and extraordinary prospect draw me to yon mountains, the lure of which I can't withstand; I leave you now and I don't know if I will be back again. I am carrying a sum of money with me that is safer in your hands than it is in mine, and so I ask you to keep it for me; if I'm not back in a year's time, you can keep it and take it as a token of my gratitude for your proven friendship.'

So the stranger set off, and Christian agreed to hold the money. He took pains to keep it under lock and key, and every now and then, driven by an exaggerated sense of scrupulousness, he counted it again to make sure nothing was missing, and made

a big to-do about it. ‘This much money could make us very happy,’ he once said to his father, ‘if the stranger were not to return, there’s enough here to take care of us and our children for life.’

‘Forget about that gold,’ the old man replied, ‘it won’t make us happy, we have never lacked for anything, thank God, put the thought of it out of your mind.’

Often Christian woke up at night to rouse the hired hands to get to work and to supervise everything himself. Concerned that his son would spoil his youth and his health from over-diligence, the father awakened one night to warn him to curtail his activities, when, to his great surprise, he found him seated under a little lamp at a table once again assiduously counting the gold pieces.

‘My son,’ the old man said with a heavy heart, ‘have you sunk to that level, did this damned metal find its way under our roof just to cause our misfortune? Pull yourself together, my dear boy, lest the evil one drain your blood and your life.’

‘Yes,’ said Christian, ‘I don’t understand myself any more, the thought of it won’t let me be, by day or by night; see how it gapes at me again, its red glimmer pierces deep in my heart! Listen how it jingles, this golden blood! It calls to me in my sleep, I hear it when music is playing, when the wind blows, when people chatter on the street; when the sun shines, all I see are these yellow eyes winking at me, whispering sweet, tender endearments in my ear: so I’m driven to rouse myself every night just to slake its thirst for love, and then I feel it thrill in inner exultation at the touch of my fingers, it grows ever redder and more radiant with pleasure; you can see for yourself the glow of ecstasy!’

Trembling and in tears, the old man took his son in his arms, prayed and said: ‘Christian, my boy, you must turn back to the word of God, you must go more regularly to church and be more diligent and devout in your worship, or else you’ll dry up inside and waste away in sad misery.’

The money was locked away again, Christian promised to mend his ways and to find his footing, and the old man felt reassured. More than a year had passed, and there had been no word from the stranger; the old man finally gave in to his son’s entreaties and the money left behind was invested in lands and in other ways. In the village people got talking of the young farmer’s wealth, and Christian seemed inordinately gratified and content, so much so that the father thanked his lucky stars to see him so hale and hearty: all his fears were allayed. So much the more was his surprise when one evening Elisabeth took him aside and told him in tears how she no longer understood her husband; he talked so strangely, especially at night, had dark dreams, often sleepwalked around the room without knowing it, and filled her ears with the oddest things that often made her shudder. But what dismayed her most was his gaiety during the day, as his laughter was wild and impudent, and the look in his eyes was mad – he was just not himself. The father was stunned, and the troubled wife continued: ‘He keeps talking about the stranger, and claims they’d already met, that this strange man was, in fact, a gorgeous woman. And he doesn’t want to go out to the fields or work in the garden any more, as he says he hears a terrible groaning underground, like the kind you hear when you pluck out a root. He shrinks back in terror and seems to tremble before all plants and herbs as if they

were ghosts.'

'Good God!' cried the father, 'has the awful craving already taken such deep root that it has come to this? Then his haunted heart isn't human any more, it's the stuff of cold metal. Anyone who has lost his love of flowers has forsaken all love and fear of God.'

The following day the father went for a walk with his son and repeated to him some of the things Elisabeth had told him; he warned him to embrace piety and that he had better turn his spirit to godly reflections.

To which Christian replied: 'Gladly, father. I often feel such a sense of well-being, and everything seems to succeed; it's the strangest thing, for a long while, for years on end, I'm inclined to lose sight completely of my true self, and to slip with ease, so it seems, into someone else's life; but then all of a sudden it is as if my own ascendant star, the real me, rises in my heart like a new moon and defeats the strange force. I could be completely contented, but once on one wondrous night an arcane sign passed through my hands and was imprinted deep in my heart; often that magical figure is asleep, unnoticeable – I mean it's absent from my spirit – but then, all of a sudden, it wells up again like a poison and invades my every move. And once it has got hold of me all my thoughts and feelings are ruled by it, everything else is transformed, or rather engulfed, by its force. Just as a lunatic shrinks back in terror at the sight of water and the poison intensifies in his veins, so I am affected by all sharp-angled shapes, by every line, by every glimmer; everything in me wants to be free of that immanent presence and to hasten its delivery like a baby, and my spirit and body are riddled with fear. Just as the heart received it from a feeling in response to external stimuli, that sentient muscle writhes and wrestles to retransform it into an externally directed feeling just to be rid of it and at peace.'

'It was an unlucky star,' said the old man, 'that pulled you away from us; you were born for a quiet life, your spirit was inclined to peacefulness and plants, but your impatience led you astray into the society of stones. The cliffs, the crooked crags with their sharp-edged shapes shattered your spirit and instilled in you the devastating hunger for metal. You should always have averted and so preserved yourself from the sight of the mountains, and that's how I thought to raise you, but it was not to be. Your humility, your peace of mind, your childlike innocence were overwhelmed by stubbornness, wild ways and arrogance.'

'No,' said the son, 'I remember very clearly that it was a plant that first introduced me to the misfortunes of the whole world, it's since then that I have become aware of the moans and groans evident in all of nature every way you turn your head, if only you give heed to it; the plants, herbs, flowers and trees are all squirming with pain, consumed by a great wound; the corpses of splendid stone worlds that prevailed before them, they treat our eyes to a spectacle of the most revolting state of decay. Now I understand that this is what that root was trying to tell me with its guttural groans, it forgot itself in its pain and revealed everything to me. That's why I find all green things so irritating, so much at odds with my life; they try to erase the image of that beloved figure from my heart and to win over my

soul every spring with their twisted cadaverous pose. It's unheard of and cunning how they pulled the wool over your eyes, old man, why they've taken possession of your soul. Just ask the stones, you'll be surprised to hear what they have to say.'

The father looked at him a long time and had nothing more to say. They walked back home in silence and, just like his daughter-in-law, the old man was now deeply disturbed by his son's jovial manner, since it seemed altogether out of character – as if another being, turning his body into a machine, played him awkwardly and badly.

It was time again for the harvest festival. The entire community went to church, and Elisabeth and the children likewise put on their Sunday best to attend the service; her husband also got ready to accompany her, but inexplicably turned around before they reached the door of the church and left the village lost in thought. He sat himself down on a nearby hill and gazed again at the smoking chimneys, listened to the sound of singing and the organ tones emanating from the church, and watched dressed-up children dancing and playing on the village green. 'I've lost my life in a dream!' he said to himself. 'Years have gone by since I descended from this hill, and went to join the children who played here then and now sit seriously in church. I too went into that building, but Elisabeth is no longer the bright-eyed young girl she was, her youth has faded, I no longer seek out her gaze with the same longing I felt before. I wilfully forsook a lofty eternal bliss for a temporal, fleeting fling with happiness.'

Wistful, he walked into the nearby woods and pressed on into the darkest shade. A terrible silence surrounded him, no breeze stirred in the leaves. At that very moment he saw a man in the distance approach; recognizing him as the stranger, he took fright; his first thought was that he would ask for his money back. As the figure came closer, he realized how wrong he had been, for the approaching profile disintegrated as he gazed upon it; a hideously ugly old woman came up to him, hobbling on a crutch, dressed in filthy rags, with a torn kerchief holding a few grey hairs in place. In a grating voice she addressed Christian and asked after his name and station in life; he replied in detail, whereupon he said: 'But who are you?'

'They call me the Wench of the Woods, and every child has heard tell of me. Have we never met?' With these last words she turned around, and Christian thought he recognized the golden veil flitting among the treetops, the proud gait, the mighty build of her limbs. He wanted to run after her but he could find her no more.

At that very moment something glittering drew his gaze down to the green grass. He picked it up and saw that it was the magic tablet inlaid with colourful precious stones and with the image of the marvellous figure which he had lost many years ago. With a sudden burst, the figure and the bright lights sparked all his senses. He took tight hold of it to convince himself that he once again had it in his hands and hurried back to the village. He met his father. 'See,' he called to him, 'the thing I so often told you about that I thought existed only in my dreams is now definitely and truly mine.'

The old man studied the tablet a long time and said: 'My son, my heart shudders when I look at the outline of these stones and, pondering, sense the meaning of this strange syntax; see how coldly it sparkles, what gruesome looks these stones give,

bloodthirsty like the red eye of the tiger. Throw away this inscription that makes you grow cold and gruesome yourself, and turns your heart to stone’:

See, the gentle blossoms bursting,
How from their own heart they rear,
And like children roused, the first thing
They will greet you with good cheer.

Peek-a-boo, their life’s a pleasure,
Turn their faces to the sun,
For her warm kiss is a treasure,
And more precious there is none.

For her gentle lips they pine,
Love and longing takes its toll;
Smiling once, now lie supine,
Withered, willingly grown old.

Nothing’s sweeter than to yield
To the lure of the loved one,
And in dying to reveal
That in fading we become.

Pressed and drained, it’s not yet spent:
The flower’s love still fills the air,
Thrilling others with its scent,
Though it isn’t even there.

Love’s a minstrel to man’s spirit,
Makes the heartstrings softly quaver,
And the soul says: Yes, I hear it,
All in life that there’s to savour:
Aching, longing to be near it.

‘There must still be marvellous, immeasurable treasures left to be dug out of the depths of the earth,’ the son replied. ‘Just to locate them, lift them out and make them mine! Just to press the earth to me like a beloved bride so that, her heart throbbing with love, she would gladly give up her most precious possession! The Wench of the Woods called out to me, I’m going to search for her. There’s an abandoned old mine shaft nearby dug centuries ago by a miner; maybe I’ll find her there!’

He rushed away. The old man tried in vain to hold him back, but his son soon disappeared from view. Several hours later, with considerable effort, the father reached the old mine; he saw the footprints pressed in the sand at the entrance and turned around in tears, convinced that his son made a mad dash in and drowned in the depth of the water that had seeped in over time.

From then on the father was despondent and in tears. The whole village mourned the passing of the young farmer, Elisabeth was inconsolable, the children wept and wailed. Six months later the old father died; Elisabeth’s parents followed soon thereafter, and she was obliged to manage the household alone. All the chores took her mind off her misery, raising the children and running the estate left her no time for worry and grief. After two years she decided to marry again; she exchanged vows with a spirited young man who had loved her since childhood. But soon things changed for the worse. Cattle died, hired hands and maids were derelict in

their duty, barns filled with fruit burned to the ground, people who owed considerable debts disappeared with the money. Soon the landowner felt compelled to sell several fields and meadows; but a bad harvest and heavy overheads made matters even worse. There was little doubt but that the wondrously acquired money seemed to fly out of the window; in the meantime the family grew, and in their despair Elisabeth and her new husband became careless and negligent; he tried to distract himself with strong wine that made him sulky and irritable, and so Elisabeth often bemoaned her fate with bitter tears. And as their fortunes declined their friends in the village withdrew, such that within a few years she felt herself abandoned and only scraped by from week to week with the greatest effort.

All they had left were a few sheep and a cow that Elisabeth and the children often watched over themselves. So one day, as she sat in the pasture tending to her work, with Leanore at her side and a newborn baby nursing at her breast, she spotted in the distance a strange figure advancing towards her. It was a barefoot man in a torn coat, his face burnt dark brown from the sun and all but hidden by a long dishevelled beard; he wore no hat on his head, but had a wreath of green leaves woven in his hair that only added to the wildness and strangeness of his appearance. Bearing a heavy load in a tightly bound sack on his back, he walked leaning on the bough of a young fir tree.

Stepping closer, he set down his heavy load and gasped for air. He bid good day to the woman, who shrank back at his appearance; the girl clung to her mother. Once he had caught his breath he said: ‘I’ve come from an arduous trek through the bleakest mountains on earth, but it paid off, as I brought back the most precious treasures you could imagine or ever wish for. Look here and be amazed!’ Hereupon he opened the sack and emptied its contents; it was full of pebbles, as well as big hunks of quartz and other stones. ‘It’s just that these jewels haven’t yet been polished and filed down,’ he added, ‘that’s why they don’t dazzle the eye; the sparkling fire is still buried in their hearts, but all you’ve got to do is beat it out of them, scare them into letting down their guard, then you’ll see what stuff they’re made of.’ At these words, he picked up a hunk of rock and struck it hard against another, so that the sparks flew. ‘Did you see that sparkle?’ he cried out. ‘They’re all fire and flicker inside lightening the darkness with their laughter, but they won’t yet do it willingly.’ He painstakingly swept everything back into his sack and tied its cord tightly. ‘I know you, woman,’ he said wistfully, ‘you’re Elisabeth.’

The woman took fright. ‘How do you know my name?’ she asked with portentous trembling.

‘Dear God!’ said the poor unfortunate, ‘I’m Christian, who once came to you as a hunter, don’t you recognize me?’

Overcome by fear and profound pity, she did not know what to say. He fell into her arms and kissed her.

Elisabeth cried out: ‘God in heaven, my husband’s coming!’

‘Be still,’ he said, ‘I’m as good as dead to you; there in the forest my beauty, the mighty wench in the golden veil, is waiting for me. That’s my beloved child, Leanore. Come here, my dear little one, and give me a kiss, just one, so that I may

once again feel your lips on mine, then I'll be on my way.'

Leanore cried and clung to her mother, who, shaking with tears, half nudged her towards the wanderer, half held her back, and finally took her in her arms and pressed her to her breast. Then he quietly walked away, and at the edge of the forest they saw him talking to the terrible Wench of the Woods.

'What's wrong?' asked the husband upon finding mother and daughter both white in the face and trembling with tears. Neither could bring herself to reply.

But the poor unfortunate wanderer was never seen again.

St Cecilia or the Power of Music (A legend)

1810

Heinrich von Kleist

At the end of the sixteenth century, as the iconoclastic storm of destruction raged in the Netherlands, three brothers, young students in Wittenberg, met up in the city of Aachen with a fourth brother, himself engaged as a preacher in Antwerp. They sought to lay claim to an inheritance left them by an old uncle whom none of them knew, and since no one was there to meet them at the place where they were supposed to apply, they retired to an inn in town. After several days, which they spent sounding out the preacher on the curious incidents that had occurred in the Netherlands, it so happened that Corpus Christi Day was soon to be celebrated by the nuns in the Cloister of St Cecilia, which, at the time, was located just outside the gates of the city; so that, fired up by the revelry, their youth and the example of the Netherlanders, the four brothers decided to treat the city of Aachen to its own spectacle of destruction. That evening, the preacher, who had already led several such initiatives, gathered together a group of young merchants' sons and students committed to the new religious teachings, all of whom spent the night at the inn carousing over wine and food, heaping curses on the papacy; and as soon as day broke over the ramparts of the city, they equipped themselves with pickaxes and other tools of destruction to carry out their business. They triumphantly agreed upon a signal, at the sounding of which they would start smashing the stained-glass windows decorated with biblical tales; and, certain of the large following they would find among the people, they resolved at the hour when the bells sounded in the cathedral not to leave a stone of the sanctuary intact. The abbess, who had, come daybreak, been warned by a friend of the impending danger to the cloister, sent word several times in vain to the imperial bailiff in charge of keeping the peace in the city, requesting a guard detail to protect the cloister; the officer – who was himself hostile to the papacy and, as such, at the very least a clandestine sympathizer with the new religious teachings – denied her request under the pretext that she was imagining things and that there was not the slightest risk of danger to the cloister. Meanwhile, the hour struck at which the service was to begin, and amidst fear and prayer, and with a dark foreboding of things to come, the nuns prepared themselves for mass. Their only protectors were a seventy-year-old cloister caretaker and a few armed porters who stood watch at the gates of the church. In such cloisters, as is common knowledge, the nuns, who are well trained in all sorts of instruments, play their own music; often – perhaps precisely on account of the feminine feel of this mysterious art form – with a precision, a mastery and a sensitivity not to be found in male orchestras. And, to the sisters'

twofold distress, their *Kapellmeisterin*, Sister Antonia, who usually conducted the orchestra, had fallen ill with a nervous fever several days before; such that, in addition to the danger posed by the four blasphemous brothers who had already been spotted, cloaked and ready, beside the columns outside the church, the cloister was all abuzz, worrying how the performance of a sacred musical work would come off in a seemly manner. The abbess, who on the previous evening had ordered that a stirring, age-old Italian mass composed by an anonymous master be presented – a work which the cloister orchestra had already performed on several occasions and to the finest effect, on account of its exceptional holiness and loveliness – was now more adamant than ever in her command, and once again sent word to Sister Antonia to find out how she was; but the nun who transmitted the message returned with the news that Sister Antonia lay unconscious in her bed and that it was altogether out of the question to think that she might direct the aforementioned work. Meanwhile, in the cathedral, where more than a hundred evil-doers of all classes and ages armed with hatchets and crowbars had assembled, the most unthinkable incidents had occurred; some of the porters stationed at the gates of the sanctuary had been rudely shoved around and the lone nuns who every now and then passed through the aisles engaged in some pious matter were treated to the sauciest and most shameless remarks; as a consequence of which the old caretaker hastened to the sacristy and, falling to his knees, begged the abbess to cancel the service and put herself under the protection of the commandant in the city. But the abbess was unwavering in her resolve that the prescribed service be celebrated in honour of God Almighty; she reminded him of his sworn duty to stand guard over the mass and the sacred festivities conducted in the cathedral; and since the bell had just tolled, she commanded the nuns, who stood trembling around her, to pick an oratorio, no matter which and of what quality, and to begin the service with it immediately.

The nuns promptly hastened to the organ balcony; the score of a musical work that they had often performed was distributed; violins, oboes and cellos were tested and tuned, just as Sister Antonia suddenly appeared on the steps, fresh and healthy, albeit a bit pale in the face. She clasped under her arm the score of the age-old Italian mass upon whose performance the abbess had so adamantly insisted. In answer to the nuns' stunned question: 'Where did you come from? And how did you so suddenly recover?' Sister Antonia replied: 'No matter, my friends, no matter!', distributed the score she had in hand and sat herself down at the organ, glowing with anticipation of the thrill of directing this superb piece of music. It came as a wondrous, heavenly consolation easing the hearts of the pious women, who promptly positioned themselves with their instruments on the balustrade. The acute tension that they felt served to vault their souls, swinging them, as it were, into the heavenly heights of harmony. The oratorio was played with the greatest and loveliest musical skill; during the entire performance not a breath stirred in the aisles and on the pews – especially during the *Salve regina*, and even more so during the *Gloria in excelsis*, it was as if all those present in the church were dead; for in spite of their evil intent, not even the dust was scattered on the marble floor

beneath the feet of the four accursed brothers and their rabble, and the cloister still stood intact at the end of the Thirty Years' War, whereupon, pursuant to an article in the Westphalian Peace Treaty, it was, nevertheless, declared secularized.

Six years later, when this incident had long since been forgotten, the mother of the four youths arrived from The Hague and, after sadly reporting their disappearance to the magistrate of Aachen, initiated an official court inquiry as to the road they might have taken. The last word received from them in the Netherlands, where, in fact, they came from, as their mother told, was a letter written prior to the aforementioned incident, on the eve of Corpus Christi, by the preacher to a friend of his, a schoolteacher in Antwerp, in which he elaborated with much merriment (or rather, a free-spirited humour) in four tightly written pages, on a planned action to storm the Cloister of St Cecilia – concerning which the mother did not, however, wish to elaborate. After several failed attempts to ferret out the persons sought by the distressed woman, the authorities suddenly remembered four young people, their nationality and place of origin unknown, who, for a few years now – a period of time more or less in accordance with the dates she indicated – found themselves in the municipal madhouse recently endowed with imperial funds. Since, however, the four youths in question suffered from a delirium derived from a religious notion, and their comportment, according to the sad testimony taken by the court, remained altogether gloomy and melancholy – this description accorded so little with the mother's, alas, all too familiar sense of her sons' temperaments, that she paid this news but little notice, especially since it seemed almost certain that the young people in question were Catholic. Nevertheless, oddly struck by a number of distinguishing attributes used to describe them, she went one day to the madhouse, accompanied by a court officer, and asked the director to be so good as to permit her an exploratory visit with the four hapless, troubled youths in his charge. But who can describe the horror of that poor woman, who immediately, upon passing through the door of their cell, recognized her sons? They sat in long black robes around a table on which a crucifix stood, and seemed to be engaged in silent worship of it, with their hands folded before them on the wooden plank. Robbed of her strength, the woman collapsed into a chair. In answer to her question: 'Whatever are they doing in this place?' the director replied: 'They are simply consumed by their glorification of the Saviour, whom they believe themselves better qualified than most to recognize as the true son of the one true God.' The director added that these youths have for the last six years led this ghostly existence; that they slept but little and hardly ate; that no syllable passed from their lips; that only at the midnight hour did they rise from their seated position; and that they then, in unison, in a voice that made the windows shake, intoned the *Gloria in excelsis*. The director concluded with the assurance that these youths were in perfect physical health; that one could not deny that they showed a certain high-spiritedness, however solemn and ceremonial it be; that, when declared mad, they merely gave a sympathetic shrug of the shoulders, and that they had already declared on several occasions: 'If the citizens of the good city of Aachen only knew what we know, they would all set aside their petty affairs and likewise incline their

heads before the crucifix and sing out the *Gloria*.'

The woman, who could not bear the dreadful sight of these sad souls and promptly had herself led back to her room on shaking knees, proceeded the very next morning to the home of Mr Gotthelf Veit, the reputed draper, to try to establish the cause of this dreadful condition; for this man was mentioned in the preacher's letter, and it was revealed that he had enthusiastically taken part in the plan to wreak havoc in the Cloister of St Cecilia on Corpus Christi Day. The draper Veit, who had since got married and fathered many children and taken over his father's considerable business, received the woman most graciously; and when he learnt what business it was that brought her to him he promptly locked the door and, bidding her have a seat, gave the following account:

'My dear woman, if you will not involve me in any legal proceedings in connection with your sons, with whom I admit to having been in contact some six years ago, then I will bare my heart without reserve and tell you all I know: yes, we did, indeed, have the intention mentioned in the letter! For what reason this plan of action fell through I simply cannot conceive, for it had been laid out to the last detail with a truly godless ingenuity; Heaven itself appears to have taken the cloister of the pious women under its protection. For you must know that your sons had spurred on many a stout-hearted soul to take decisive actions, and that they had already disrupted the service with various pranks; more than three hundred scoundrels armed with clubs and torches lurked behind the walls of our misguided city, awaiting the preacher's signal to tear up the sacred place. But then, as soon as the music started up, your sons suddenly removed their hats all at the same time and in a manner that struck us as odd; one after another, as though gripped with deep, inexpressible emotion, they raised their hands to their bowed faces, and the preacher, suddenly turning to us after a heartfelt pause, called out to us all in a loud and terrible voice likewise to remove our hats. A few comrades-in-arms vainly egged him on in a whisper, simultaneously nudging him with their elbows to give the agreed sign to storm the church. But in lieu of a reply, the preacher sank to his knees with his hands crossed over his breast, along with his brothers, their faces pressed down in the dust, muttering the whole slew of prayers that they had mocked but a short while ago. Deeply troubled by this spectacle, the mob of wretched would-be rioters, robbed of their leader, stood around, irresolute and idle, till the end of the oratorio that wondrously rang down upon them from the balcony; and since, on orders of the commandant, at that very moment numerous arrests were made, and several miscreants who had caused disturbances were taken into custody and led off by a guard, the bulk of the rioters had no recourse but to mingle hastily with the mass of departing worshippers and exit the house of God. That evening, after enquiring several times in vain as to the whereabouts of your sons, who had not returned, with a dark foreboding and accompanied by a couple of friends I went back to the cloister to ask after them from the watchmen the imperial guard had left behind to lend a hand. But how can I describe my horror, noble woman, when I spotted those four men still lying prostrate before the altar of the church, fervently hugging the ground with breast and forehead, as though they themselves had been

turned into stone! In vain did the caretaker, who entered at the very same moment, pluck at their coat sleeves and rattle their arms, urging them to rouse themselves and leave the cathedral, as it was all dark and not another soul was left. They did not take heed, half rising only in a dreamlike manner when he had his lackeys grip them under the arms and drag them out through the portals; whereupon at last, albeit moaning and groaning and with many a tormented look back at the cathedral that sparkled behind us in the bright sunlight, they followed us back to the city. Our friends and I, we delicately asked again and again on the way back: what in the world happened to them, what experience so awful as to alter their cast of mind; to which, with a benevolent gaze, they squeezed our hands, peered thoughtfully at the ground and from time to time – dear God! with a look in their eyes that still breaks my heart – they wiped tears from their eyes. Whereupon, having arrived back at their lodgings, they adroitly and gracefully fashioned a cross out of strips of birch bark, pressed into a mound of wax between two lights ordinarily used by the maid, and set it down on the big table in the middle of the room; and as the gathering of friends, which grew from hour to hour, stood by in scattered groups, wringing their hands and watching these silent, ghostly goings-on, speechless with pity, the brothers each took a seat at the table and, as though their senses were closed off to any other apparent reality, they silently folded their hands in prayer. They craved neither the food the maid brought each morning on the express orders of their comrades nor, despite their apparent fatigue, the beds made up for them at nightfall in the adjoining room. And so as not to arouse further the indignation of the innkeeper, who was already vexed by this curious display, their friends were obliged to sit down at the richly laden table and, salting the dishes prepared for a goodly company with their bitter tears, had no choice but to gobble it all up. Then all of a sudden the clock struck midnight; after listening for a fleeting moment to the dull clang of the clock, your four sons suddenly rose as one; and as we gazed with fearful anticipation in their direction, the folded napkins falling from our hands, wondering what in heaven's name might happen next after such a strange and disturbing beginning – with grisly, ghoulish voices they started singing the *Gloria in excelsis*. This is how leopards and wolves must sound when in the icy heart of winter they bellow at the firmament; the supporting pillars of the house shook, I assure you, and, struck by the visible breath of their lungs, the windows rattled, threatening to shatter, as though pummelled by the force of handfuls of sand flung against them. Struck dumb by this terrible scene, we staggered apart in all directions, our hair standing on end; leaving coat and hat behind, we scattered hither and thither along the outlying streets, which, within moments, were teeming with more than a hundred other people torn in terror from their sleep. Breaking down the door, the crowd stormed up the stairs and into the room to seek out the source of that terrifying and sickening scream that sounded like a pitiful plea for forgiveness, destined for God's ear, issued from the lips of eternally damned sinners in the lowest flaming fundaments of hell. Finally, when the church bell tolled one o'clock, without having taken the slightest notice of the innkeeper's angry protests or the shaken outcries of the gathered throng, they fell silent; with a cloth they wiped from

their brows the sweat that had been dripping in fat drops on chin and breast; and, spreading out their coats, stretched themselves out on the floorboards to catch an hour's rest from such torturous affairs. Indulgent until now, as soon as the innkeeper saw them shut their eyes, he passed a cross over their heads; and, relieved to be free for the moment from this calamity, assuring everyone that all would be better in the morning, he bid the mysteriously muttering throng that had gathered there clear the room. But, alas! At the cock's first cry, the poor unfortunates rose again to recommence the same desolate, ghostlike cloister life around the table, from which exhaustion alone had compelled them to desist for a while. Accepting neither the admonitions nor the offers of help from the innkeeper, whose heart melted at their piteous condition, they bid him politely turn away the friends who would otherwise faithfully gather every morning in their rooms; they asked nothing of him but bread and water and, if possible, a little straw strewn at night – as a consequence of which, the man who had previously made much money off their merriment felt compelled to report the whole unhappy business to the authorities, and to ask that these four people, doubtless inhabited by an evil spirit, be duly conducted out of his house. Whereupon, on the orders of the magistrate, they were made to undergo a medical examination; and as they were found to be mad, they were brought to and lodged in, as you know, the madhouse founded within the walls of our city, thanks to the kindness of our late departed emperor, to benefit such poor unfortunates.'

This and much more said the draper Gotthelf Veit, the bulk of whose statement we have decided to withhold as, in our view, enough has already been said to serve our examination of the context of what happened; whereupon he once again enjoined the woman under no circumstances to involve him in the event of a legal investigation into the matter.

Three days thereafter, still deeply shaken by this account and with the aid of a lady friend who held her arm, as the weather was nice the woman went out to visit the cloister with the sad intention of seeing for herself the place where God had, as though with invisible bolts of lightning, laid her sons low; the two women, however, found the entrance to the cathedral all boarded up due to construction work, and could only with great pains, standing on tiptoes and peeking through a gap in the planks, make out the splendid, sparkling stained-glass rose in the rear of the church. Many hundreds of workers, singing merry songs, were engaged within, standing on narrow, intricately interlaced scaffolding, adding a good third to the height of the steeples and decking the rooftops and spires, theretofore covered only with slate, with sturdy sheets of copper that shimmered in the bright rays of sunlight. Deep black storm clouds rimmed by a golden glimmer hung overhead, framing the building; the thunderstorm had already played itself out over Aachen and the surrounding region, and after flinging a last few feeble bolts of lightning in the direction of the cathedral, it sank with a dissatisfied grumbling in the east, dissolving into a mist. And it so happened that, just as the women, deeply preoccupied by their thoughts, descended the steps of the large cloister building in which the sisters lived, perceiving this double drama in the sky, a passing sister chanced to learn the identity of the woman standing under the portal; whereupon the

abbess, informed of a letter in the latter's possession concerning the planned acts on Corpus Christi Day, promptly sent a sister down to bid the Dutch woman come up to see her. Though momentarily a bit taken aback, the mother, no less honourably inclined in her comportment, resolved to accept the request; and while her friend waited in an antechamber next door, the folding doors to the lovely loft itself were flung open before the Dutch woman as she climbed the steps. There she found the abbess, a noble woman of serene royal bearing, seated in a chair, her foot resting on a footstool with legs in the shape of dragon's claws; beside her on a writing table lay a musical score. After ordering a chair for the visitor, the abbess told her that she had been informed by the mayor of her arrival in the city; and after asking her in a kindly fashion as to the welfare of her unfortunate sons, and forthwith encouraging her to try to grasp the fate that befell them, as it could not be altered – she expressed the wish to see the letter that the preacher had written to his friend, the schoolteacher in Antwerp. The Dutch woman, who was savvy enough to fathom what possible consequences this might have for her sons, was momentarily nonplussed by this request; but since the honourable face of the abbess instilled immediate confidence, and gave no cause to believe that it was her intention to make public use of its contents, the visitor, after a brief hesitation, pulled the letter out from between her breasts and handed it to the noble lady followed by a fervent kiss of her hand. As the abbess read through the letter, the woman cast a fleeting glance at the musical score carelessly left open on the desk; and since, in light of the draper's account, she suspected that it might well have been the powerful effect of the music that on that awful day troubled and twisted the minds of her poor sons, turning around in her chair she timidly enquired of the sister who stood behind her: 'Was this perchance the musical work performed in the cathedral on the morning of that curious Corpus Christi Day celebration?' Upon the young sister's reply – Yes! She remembered hearing about it, and that, when not in use, it tended to lie open in the room of the honourable abbess – the woman leapt up out of her chair, clearly agitated, and, with all sorts of thoughts running through her mind, stood leaning over the desk. She gazed at the unknown musical notations, wherewith a terrible spirit appeared secretly to trace a circle, and when her eyes fell on the *Gloria in excelsis* she suddenly felt as if the earth sank beneath her feet. It was as though the total shock of the musical art that had destroyed her sons now passed in a swell over her head; she feared, by the sheer sight of it, that she was losing her mind; and, after quickly pressing the page to her lips with a boundless stirring of humility and submission before the omnipotence of God, she sat back down in the chair again. Meanwhile, the abbess had finished reading through the letter and said as she folded it up: 'God himself shielded the cloister on that wondrous day from the insolence of your sadly misguided sons. Whatever tool he employed may be immaterial to you, as a Protestant. You would also find it hard to believe what I could tell you about it. For you must know that not a living soul can tell just who it was seated at the organ bench at that terrible hour serenely directing the musical work that you find flung open there as the riot of destruction threatened to break out in our midst. According to testimony taken on the morning of the following day in the presence of the

cloister caretaker and several other men and duly deposited in the archive, it has been established that Sister Antonia, the only person able to direct that work, lay, ailing, unconscious, her limbs motionless, in a corner of her cloister cell throughout the time of the entire performance; a sister who, as a relative, was assigned to attend to her physical care, never left her bed the whole morning on which Corpus Christi Day was celebrated in the cathedral. Indeed, Sister Antonia herself would doubtless have confirmed and verified the fact that it was not she who suddenly appeared at the organ in so strange and astonishing a manner – if her altogether immobile state had permitted her to be questioned, and the poor sick sister were not laid low on the evening of that same day by the nervous fever, a condition not previously deemed life-threatening, but from which she died. And, having been informed of this incident, the Archbishop of Trier has already made the declaration that alone can explain it, namely that "St Cecilia herself performed this at the same time terrible and wondrous miracle"; and I have just received a brief from the Pope in which he confirmed its veracity.' Whereupon she gave the woman back the letter, which she had merely asked to see to get a more detailed account of what she already knew, with the promise that she would make no further use of it; and after asking the mother if there was any hope of her sons' recovery, and if perchance she could help with money or some other means of support, which the woman, kissing the hem of her gown, tearfully declined – the abbess offered her hand in friendship and bid her farewell.

Here ends this legend. The woman, whose continued presence in Aachen was completely pointless, after leaving the court a small sum of money for the care of her poor sons returned to The Hague where, the following year, deeply moved by all that had happened, she forthwith returned to the lap of the Catholic Church; her sons, for their part, passed away at a ripe old age, succumbing to a serene and joyous death after having, as was their wont, sung the *Gloria in excelsis* yet again.

Peter Schlemiel

1814

Adelbert von Chamisso

I

Following a fortuitous if less than pleasant voyage, we finally pulled into port. As soon as the dinghy dropped me ashore, I hoisted my meagre baggage onto my back and, pressing my way through the teeming multitudes of that harbour town, I stopped at the first doss-house whose shabby shingle caught my eye. When I asked for a room, the houseboy gave me one look and immediately led me up to the garret. I had them bring me water to wash and thereafter requested precise directions to the home of Mr Thomas John. 'Take the North Gate, and it's the first manor on your right, a big, new structure of red and white marble with many columns. Can't miss it.'

'Thanks,' I said. It was still quite early in the day. I untied my miserable bundle, pulled out my realtered black frock coat, donned my best dress clothes, slipped the letter of introduction into my breast pocket and set off immediately to meet the man who, I hoped, would help me in my modest plans at self-improvement.

After hiking up the long northern road and reaching the city gate, I soon spotted the marble columns shimmering through the verdure. 'Here I am,' I thought. I wiped the dust off my shoes with my handkerchief, straightened my tie and, murmuring a prayer to God, rang the doorbell. The door sprang open. There on the threshold I was obliged to undergo an interrogation; at last the doorman announced my arrival, and I had the honour of being shepherded into the gardens, where Mr John was just then entertaining a small party of guests. I immediately recognized the man by the shimmer of his impeccable self-satisfaction. He received me quite nobly – as a rich man receives a poor devil; he even deigned to face me without turning away from the others, and took the letter of introduction out of my hand.

'Well, well! From my brother, is it; not a word have I heard from him in years. He's well, I trust? – wherever he is,' he continued, rejoining his guests without waiting for an answer, and motioning with the letter for me to tag along to the top of the hill. 'That's where I plan to have them put up the new building.' He broke open the seal without even interrupting his conversation with the others, the subject of which was wealth. 'Frankly,' he maintained, 'anyone who isn't worth at least a million is nothing but – if you'll forgive the term – a snivelling worm.'

'How true, how true!' I cried out in full accord, with a fulsome, oozing enthusiasm.

This must have pleased him, for he smiled at me and said, 'Stay around, my friend, later perhaps I'll have a moment to respond to this.' He nodded at the letter,

which he proceeded to slip into his pocket, then turned back to the others. He offered his arm to one young woman, other gentlemen attended to other beauties; in a courtly manner the merry company idled up the rose-covered hill.

I slunk along behind them without getting in anyone's way, for nobody paid me any further attention. High spirits reigned among Mr John's invited guests; they fooled around and told jokes, at times they spoke seriously of light-hearted things, more often making light of serious matters, and took a particular pleasure in poking fun at absent friends and their affairs. I was too much a stranger to grasp all the allusions, too much wrapped up in myself and my own troubles to share in the general merriment.

We had reached the rose bushes. Lovely Fanny, who, it appeared, was everyone's favourite, impetuously reached out and broke off a blossoming sprig of roses, and in the process pricked herself on a thorn; it was as though purple drops fell from the dark rose onto her delicate hand. Everyone was up in arms. English plasters were requested. A quite thin, haggard, lanky, ageing gentleman who accompanied the others, and whom I had not noticed until then, immediately stuck his hand into the pocket of his tight-fitting grey taffeta coat, pulled out a small pouch, opened it and, with a courtly bow, reached in and handed the lady the desired dressing. She accepted it without so much as acknowledging the kindness, let alone thanking the man; she had her wound dressed, and everyone proceeded up the hill, the crest of which afforded a panoramic view that took in the wide green labyrinth of the gardens and swept far out into the immeasurable expanse of the sea.

The view was truly grand and splendid. On the horizon, between the darkness of the deep and the powder blue of the sky, appeared a light spot. 'Somebody hand me a looking-glass!' cried Mr John, and even before the servants could respond to the command, the man in grey bowed humbly, stuck his hand into his coat pocket, pulled out a fine telescope and handed it to the host. The latter immediately brought it up to his eye and informed his guests that it was the ship that had departed the day before and had been held back by unfavourable winds. The telescope was passed from hand to hand and did not find its way back to its owner. I, however, peered in amazement at the man, wondering how such a large piece of equipment could possibly have emerged from the minuscule pocket. Yet nobody else seemed to take notice; they paid no more attention to the grey man than to myself.

Refreshments were served, the rarest, most exotic fruits presented in the most exquisite dishes. Mr John did the honours without much of a fuss, and for the second time addressed a word to me: 'Eat up, my good man, surely you don't enjoy such delights at sea!' I bowed in gratitude, but he didn't notice; he was already involved in conversation with someone else.

The guests expressed their desire to stretch out on the lawn at the crest of the hill with the splendid panoramic view, were it not for the dampness of the ground. How heavenly it would be, someone said, if only we had Turkish rugs to spread out here. No sooner said than done: the man in the grey coat had already slipped a hand into his pocket, and with a modest, indeed downright obsequious manner, took pains to pull out a gold-embroidered Turkish carpet. Servants took hold of it matter-of-factly

and spread it out at the desired spot. And without any further ado, the guests sat down. Dumbfounded, I once again stared in amazement at the man, his pocket and the carpet, which measured over twenty feet in length and ten in width. I rubbed my eyes, not knowing what to think of it all, particularly since no one else seemed to find anything out of the ordinary.

I would have liked to have some information about the man, to ask who he was, but I didn't know whom to ask; for I was almost more intimidated by the servants than I was by those they served. Finally I pulled myself together and approached a young man who seemed of a lesser standing than the others, and often kept to himself. Quietly I enquired as to the identity of the accommodating gentleman in grey.

'That one over there, the one who resembles a snippet of thread that slipped out of a tailor's needle?'

'Yes, the one standing alone.'

'Don't know him,' he replied, and to avoid any lengthier exchange with me, he immediately turned away and commenced making small talk with someone else.

The sun was now shining all the more brightly, and this bothered the ladies. Lovely Fanny turned to the grey man, to whom, so far as I could tell, no one had yet addressed a word, and flippantly enquired if he did not perchance also have a tent in his pocket? Responding with a deep bow, as though an undeserved honour had been paid him, he already had his hands in his pocket, and I was witness as he pulled out poles, cords, pikes – in short, everything needed to pitch a magnificent pavilion. The young gentlemen put it up, and it covered the entire length and breadth of the carpet – and not a soul found anything strange in this. I had been flabbergasted from the very beginning, and indeed felt a little queasy; just imagine my state when, in response to the next whimsical wish, I saw him pull out three horses – I swear, three big beautiful steeds fitted with saddle and reins! Imagine, for heaven's sake, three saddled steeds pulled from the same pocket out of which a wallet, a telescope, a fine Turkish carpet twenty feet long and ten feet wide, a tent of the same dimensions and all the equipment, poles and pikes that go with it had already emerged! If I hadn't sworn to have seen it with my own eyes, you surely wouldn't believe me.

As ill at ease and humble as the man appeared, despite the lack of attention he attracted from the others, his pallid presence (to which my eyes were riveted) so revolted me that I could no longer bear to look at him. I decided to slip away unnoticed from this merry company, which, considering the inconsequential role I played in it, promised to be an easy matter. I wanted to make my way back to the city and try my luck again the following morning with Mr John, and, if I found the courage, to ask him about the strange grey man. If only I had made good my intention!

I had, in fact, already succeeded in slipping through the rose hedges and down the hill, and found myself in an open meadow, when the fear of being spotted sneaking through the grass impelled me to cast a furtive look back. Imagine how startled I was to see the man in the grey coat approaching me from behind. He immediately doffed his hat to me and made the deepest bow that anyone had ever

made to me. There was no doubt that he wished to speak to me, and I could not possibly avoid him without being outright rude. I too removed my hat, bowed in turn and stood bareheaded in the blazing sunlight, as if rooted to the ground. I gave him a piercing, terrified look, and felt awfully ill at ease; not looking up at me, he bowed several more times, stepped closer and addressed me with a quiet, quavering voice and the tone and manner of a beggar.

'The gentleman will please pardon my importunity if I make so bold as to impose my uninvited presence; I have a request. Please be so kind as to forgive me—'

'But for heaven's sake, my good man!' I burst out in terror, 'what can I possibly do for a man who—' We both fell silent, and both of us, it seemed to me, turned red at the very same instant.

Following a moment of silence, he once again spoke up. 'For the short while during which I enjoyed the pleasure of your proximity, I was struck several times – please permit me to remark upon it – with inexpressible admiration for the lovely, lovely shadow you cast, that shadow you fling to the ground with a certain noble disdain and without the least notice, that lovely shadow lying even now at your feet. Forgive the admitted audacity of such a bold presumption. I wonder if you might possibly consider parting with it – I mean, selling it to me.'

He peered at me without uttering another word, and I felt as though a millstone were turning in my head. What was I supposed to make of this odd offer to buy my shadow from me? The man must be mad, I thought, and, altering my tone to suit his humble manner, I replied, 'Now, now! Good friend, isn't your own shadow enough for you? What you propose is a very curious sort of deal.'

To which he immediately answered back, 'I have here in my pocket certain things that the gentleman may find not altogether lacking in value; the highest sum would be too little to pay for such a priceless shadow.'

I felt a chill run down my spine when he reminded me of that pocket, and I deeply regretted having called him my good friend. It was my turn to speak, and I tried with immeasurable tact to retract any hint of intimacy between us. 'But my good sir,' I said, 'you must forgive your most humble servant. I don't quite catch your drift; how could I possibly … I mean, my shadow—'

He interrupted me. 'I beg the gentleman's consent, if he will permit me here on the spot to pick up and take hold of his noble shadow; how I manage is my affair. In exchange, as a token of my appreciation, the gentleman may choose from among the treasures I have here in my pocket: the original mandrake wishing-root, magic pennies, pirate doubloons, Roland's squire's serviette, a little hangman to be had for a song; but such trinkets are surely not your style: how about Fortunato's magic hat, restored, good as new; or else a magic purse just like the one he had.'

'Fortunato's magic purse?' I interrupted him, and as much as I shivered with fear in his presence, with those three words he had tapped my wildest dreams. I suddenly felt dizzy, my eyes dazzled by the glitter of imagined gold.

'Will the gentleman be so kind as to examine and test the efficacy of this purse.' He stuck his hand into his pocket, pulled out a middling large, tightly stitched pouch of strong Spanish leather fastened by two leather straps, and handed it to me.

I reached in and pulled out ten gold pieces, and another ten, and another; in a flash I extended my hand. ‘Sold! It’s a deal; in exchange for the purse, you can have my shadow.’

He shook my hand and without delay crouched down before me, and I watched as with startling skill he peeled and lifted my shadow from head to foot off the grass, rolled it up and folded it, and stuffed it in his pocket. He got up, bowed again and stepped back towards the rose bushes. It seemed to me as if I heard him quietly laughing to himself. I for my part grasped the purse tightly by its straps; all around me the world was bathed in bright sunlight, and I was oblivious to what I had done.

II

I finally came to my senses and made haste to leave this place where, I hoped, I had no more business to attend to. First I filled my pockets with gold, then I bound the straps of the purse around my neck and tucked it away under my shirt. Unnoticed, I emerged from the gardens, reached the road and headed back to the city. As I approached the gates of the city, lost in thought, I heard a voice calling behind me. ‘Young man! Hey! Young man! Listen now!’ I looked back and saw an old woman crying out, ‘Better retrace your steps, sir! The gentleman has lost his shadow!’

‘Thanks, Granny!’ I replied, and I tossed her a gold piece for the well-meant advice, whereupon I sought refuge in the shade of the trees lining the road. At the city gates I was obliged to suffer a repeat performance; the gatekeeper said, ‘Where did the gentleman leave his shadow?’ And right after that, a couple of women remarked aloud, ‘Heavens, the poor man has no shadow!’

This business was beginning to get on my nerves, so I took pains to avoid sunny places. This, however, was not always possible – not, for instance, when traversing a wide street, which I was obliged to cross, and, unfortunately for me, at the very hour when boys were coming out of school. A cursed little hunchbacked rogue – I can still see him now – immediately noticed that I was missing a shadow. This fact he revealed at the top of his lungs to all the children of the neighbourhood, who in turn proceeded on the spot to hurl lumps of dirt and deride me: ‘Honest people don a shadow when they step out into the sun.’ To get rid of them I tossed handfuls of gold among them and leapt into a carriage, with the assistance of a few sympathetic souls.

I was still quite upset when the carriage pulled up to my old lodgings; the very idea of once again setting foot in my miserable garret was more than I could bear. I had my things brought down, accepted the pathetic bundle with revulsion, scattered a few gold coins and had the driver take me to the best hotel in town. The establishment faced north; I did not have to fear the effects of sunlight here. I paid the coachman in gold coin, had the hotel prepare its best suite of rooms, and as soon as they were ready I dashed upstairs and locked myself in.

What do you think I did then? Oh my dear friend Chamisso, I am ashamed to admit it even to you of all people. I pulled out that hapless purse from under my shirt and, with a fury that flared up in me like a raging fire, I kept plucking out gold and gold and gold and ever more gold, and spread it out over the cold stone floor

and trampled through it and let it tinkle underfoot, and kept dropping more and more of it, my poor heart feasting on the glitter and the jingle, piling ever more precious metal on metal – until in a fit of exhaustion I myself sank onto that priceless mattress and, revelling in my riches, I tossed and wallowed in it. This is how I spent the entire day and the evening. I never unlocked my door; by nightfall I was still lying in my gold, and that was where sleep overcame me.

You appeared to me in a dream; it was as if I were standing behind the glass door of your little room and caught a glimpse of you seated there at your desk between a skeleton and a sheaf of dried plants; fat tomes by Haller, Humboldt and Linnaeus were spread open before you, and on your sofa lay a volume of Goethe and the *Magic Ring*. I looked at you a long while, then at every object in the room, and then at you again; but you remained perfectly still, not drawing a single breath; you were dead.

I awakened. It seemed to me to be very still. My watch had stopped. I felt completely exhausted, and thirsty and hungry too at the same time; I hadn't eaten since the previous morning. Sated, and somewhat revolted at the sight of all that gold on which just a little while ago I had gorged my heart, I shoved it aside; now all of a sudden, to my great annoyance, I didn't know what to do with it. I could hardly leave it in full view on the floor; I tried to see if the purse would gobble it back up. Nothing doing. None of my windows opened out onto the sea. I had to make do as best I could; with great effort, sweat dripping from my brow, I managed to lug it over to a huge closet in an adjoining cubicle and temporarily stored it there. I left only a few handfuls lying around.

Once I was done, I dropped, exhausted, into an armchair and waited for the sounds of movement in the house. As soon as it seemed possible, I ordered food and asked to see the hotel manager. With him I discussed my future affairs – how, for instance, I might go about furnishing a house. He recommended for my personal needs the service of a certain Bendel, whose loyal and compassionate face immediately won me over. He was to be the helpmate whose devotion and sympathetic company have since helped me weather and endure the heavy burden of my dour fate. I spent the entire day in my rooms interviewing prospective servants and dealing with shoemakers, tailors and merchants. I acquired a wardrobe for myself and bought all manner of valuables and precious stones, just to get rid of a small portion of my store of gold; and yet it seemed as if I could not even make a dent in the heap.

All the while I wavered in a terrible state of the greatest anxiety. I did not dare set foot outside my door, and in the evening I had forty candles lit in my room before I emerged from my dark corner. I remembered with dread that awful encounter with the schoolchildren. Finally I resolved, my fear notwithstanding, once again to test public opinion. It was that time of the month when the moon lights up the night sky. Late in the evening I draped a greatcoat over my shoulders, pulled my hat down low over my eyes and slipped out into the street, shivering like a common criminal. I sought out a very remote part of town before emerging into the moonlight from the shadow of the houses whose protective darkness had heretofore afforded me refuge;

I was prepared to accept the verdict on my fate from the mouths of passing strangers.

Spare me, dear friend, the pain of recounting all that I had to endure. The women, in particular, often voiced the pity with which my condition suffused their hearts; their remarks cut me to the quick just as much as the jeering of the children and the disdainful scorn of the men, particularly those well-dressed burghers who themselves cast such a broad and imposing shadow. A lovely and gracious girl, who, so it seemed, was out for an evening stroll with her parents, her glance modestly directed downwards as was theirs, looked up and cast a bright eye at me; visibly startled upon noticing my shadow-less state, she buried her beautiful face in her veil, let her head sink down and walked on in silence.

I could not bear it any longer. Salty torrents streamed from my eyes and, reeling with a shattered heart, I withdrew again into darkness. I was obliged to hug the sides of the houses for safety's sake, and, proceeding slowly, I finally arrived very late at my lodgings.

I spent a long, sleepless night. The next day, my first concern was to seek out the man in the grey coat. Who knew? I might succeed in finding him again, and how fortunate it would be if, like myself, he too regretted our ill-considered swap. I called for Bendel – he seemed clever and adroit; I described in detail the features of the man who possessed a treasure without which my life would be nothing but an ordeal. I told him the time and the place where I had seen him last, described all the other people who were present and added the following details: he should ask after the telescope, the Turkish carpet interwoven with strands of gold, a magnificent tent and finally the black stallions, all of which, I implied, were related in some way – though I did not specify just how – to the mysterious stranger, of whom no one else at that fateful garden party where I met him appeared to have taken notice, yet who had shattered the peace and joy of my life.

As soon as I had finished speaking, I hauled out as much gold as I could carry, adding diamonds and jewels to the pile to top if off. 'Bendel,' I said, 'money opens many doors and often facilitates the impossible; don't be sparing in your spending, just as I am not, but go and gladden your master's heart with tidings on which his future depends.'

He went on his way, returning, dejected, late that evening. None of Mr John's servants, none of his guests – he had sought out and questioned each and every one – had the faintest recollection of the man in the grey coat. The new telescope was there, but no one could tell where it had come from; the carpet and the tent were still there, spread out on the same hilltop; and the servants lauded the wealth of their master, but none could recall the provenance of these latest acquisitions. Mr John himself took great pleasure in these new treasures and wasn't troubled by the fact that he had no idea whatsoever where they had come from; the horses were tethered in the stables of the young men who had ridden them on that afternoon, and who were quick to praise Mr John for his generosity in giving them such fine steeds as gifts. This is what I learnt from Bendel's detailed account, and despite the fruitlessness of his efforts, his zeal and adroitness elicited my praise. Sadly, then, I

motioned for him to leave me alone with my misery.

'Now that I have informed my master of those matters of greatest importance to him,' Bendel continued, 'I must still pass on a message. Early this morning, as I was rushing off to attend to the mission that, alas, I have failed to fulfil, a man stopped me at your doorstep and said, "Be so good as to tell Mr Peter Schlemiel that he will not see me hereabouts again soon, for I am off to sea, and a fortuitous wind bids me make haste to the harbour. But one year from today I will have the honour of once again looking him up, at which time I hope to offer an attractive business proposition. Please be so kind as to convey my humble respects and assure him of my gratitude." I asked him his name, but he said you'd know who he was.'

'What did he look like?' I enquired apprehensively. And feature for feature, word for word, Bendel proceeded to describe the man in the grey coat, just as he had described him before in his recounting of the unsuccessful search. 'Oh unhappy man!' I cried out, wringing my hands, 'that was *him*!' and the realization suddenly struck poor Bendel.

'Yes, of course, it was him, in the flesh,' he shrieked, 'and I, a blind and dim-witted oaf, failed to recognize him, I failed to recognize him, and so have failed my master!'

He burst out weeping, heaping upon himself the bitterest reproaches, and his despair elicited pity from my heart. I comforted him, assured him repeatedly that I had no doubt about his faithfulness, and promptly sent him out to the harbour to hunt down any possible traces of that elusive gentleman. That very morning, however, many ships that had been held back by inauspicious winds set sail, each in a different direction, each bound for a far-flung coast, and the grey man had disappeared without a trace – like a shadow.

III

What good would wings do a man shackled in iron chains? He would have to suffer his bondage all the same, and all the more miserably. I lay like Fafner beside his hoard, far removed from the balm of any human consolation, fondling my gold, not lovingly but cursing it all the while – that wretched stuff for the sake of which I had cut myself off from life. Guarding my own dark secret, I feared the lowliest of my servants, whom I also envied; for he had his shadow, he could allow himself to be seen in broad daylight showered by the rays of the sun. Day and night I pined away alone in my rooms, and grief gnawed at my heart.

Meanwhile, another suffering soul ate his heart out before my eyes. My faithful servant Bendel would not stop castigating himself for having betrayed the trust of his good master in failing to recognize the man he had been sent out to find, with whom he believed my unhappy destiny to be bound. I, however, could hardly blame him, for I recognized in this cruel twist of fate the inscrutable nature of the unknown.

Having resolved not to pass up any possible solution to my problem, I sent Bendel with a costly diamond ring to the most renowned portrait painter in town, whom I invited to call on me. Upon his arrival, I dismissed my servants from the

room, locked the door, sat myself down beside him and, after praising his work, with a heavy heart I finally came to the point; but first I made him swear to keep what I was about to tell him a carefully guarded secret.

'Master,' I began, 'might it be possible to paint a shadow for a man who tragically lost his own?'

'An artificial shadow you mean?'

'Precisely.'

'But tell me,' he asked, 'through what clumsiness, through what negligence might the gentleman have lost his shadow?'

'Just how it happened,' I replied, 'I know but little, or maybe too much.' And I launched into the following shamefaced lie: 'In Russia, where the gentleman went on business last winter, the cold was so bitter that one day his shadow froze to the ground and he was no longer able to pry it loose.'

'Any artificial shadow that I might possibly be able to paint for the gentleman he would lose again the moment he makes a move; moreover, let me add that any man so little attached to the shadow he was born with as one must surmise from your sad account had best avoid the sun – that would be the most sensible and fool-proof solution.' He rose from his chair and bid me farewell, while regarding me with a piercing look that I could not for the life of me endure. I sank back into my chair and buried my face in my hands.

This is how Bendel found me when he entered the room. He witnessed first-hand the pain of his master and wanted quietly, respectfully, to withdraw. I looked up. I felt overcome by the burden of my misery, I simply had to communicate it to someone. 'Bendel,' I cried out to him, 'Bendel! You alone, who see and esteem my sufferings enough not to ask after their source, but appear rather to suffer them with me in silence – come to me, Bendel, and be my bosom friend! I have not hidden from you the storehouse of gold, nor will I hide from you my store of grief. Bendel, don't leave me! Bendel, you see me as a man of wealth, generous, kind-hearted; you imagine that the world ought by rights to honour me, and yet you see me fleeing from the world and locking myself away. Bendel, the world has passed judgment on me and cast me from its midst, and you too may turn away from me once you learn my terrible secret: Bendel, I am rich, generous, good-hearted, but – oh God! – I have no shadow!'

'No shadow?' the good fellow cried out in horror, and tears streamed from his eyes. 'Oh, woe is me that I was ever born to serve a shadow-less master!' He fell silent, and I held my face in my hands.

'Bendel,' I added in a trembling voice, 'now that you have my trust you can betray it. Go and denounce me to the world!' He appeared to be locked in a deep struggle with himself; finally he fell down on his knees before me and grasped my hand, which he showered with his tears.

'No,' he cried out, 'whatever the world may think, I cannot and will not abandon my good master for a mere shadow's sake. I will act justly and not wisely, I will stay with you, I will lend you my shadow, help you whenever I can, and when I cannot, I will weep with you.' I wrapped my arms around his neck, astounded at

such an uncommon nobility of spirit, fully convinced that he was not after my gold.

From that day, my fortunes and way of life underwent a change for the better. It would be difficult to describe the lengths to which Bendel had to go to conceal my infirmity from the world. Wherever I walked, he went before me and with me, anticipating any and all eventualities, and where danger threatened unexpectedly, he was quick to cover me with his own shadow, for he was bigger and stronger than I. And so I dared to circulate again among people, and I adopted a role in society. Naturally I was obliged to feign certain peculiarities and moods; but eccentricity is after all the privilege of the rich, and so long as the truth remained hidden, I enjoyed all the honour and respect that money can buy. With a new-found claim to life, I looked forward to the much-anticipated visit of the mysterious stranger a year and a day hence.

I sensed that I had best not stay too long in a place where I had already been spotted without a shadow and could easily be betrayed; it may also well be that the awful memory of my appearance at Mr John's haunted and troubled me. Thus, I intended to test the waters here, as it were, so as later, in some other place, to appear more self-assured and secure, but vain illusions won out for a while over my better judgement: it's no use casting loose once vanity has dropped anchor.

It was none other than lovely Fanny, the belle of Mr John's garden party, whom I met again at the third town in which I stopped, and who, without remembering ever having seen me before, now paid me some attention – for suddenly I was charming and witty. When I opened my mouth people listened, and I myself had no idea how I had acquired the art of directing and dominating a conversation. The impression I seemed to have made on that stunning creature turned me into precisely what she wanted me to be, an infatuated fool; and I pursued her thereafter with a thousand little attentions, seeking the refuge of shadows and sunset wherever possible. I was vain enough to want to make her vain about me, and could not with the best of intentions drive the rapture from my head to my heart.

But why repeat the entire sordid tale for you? You yourself have recounted it often enough of other honoured personages. To the age-old comedy, in which I willingly accepted a hackneyed role, I added a homespun hint of tragedy, thereby hastening the catastrophe that was so unexpectedly to befall me.

One lovely evening, as was my wont, having assembled a merry gathering in my garden, I wandered off some distance from the others arm in arm with the fair Fanny, and took great pains to churn out witticisms. In a ladylike fashion, she gazed at the ground and quietly replied in kind to each squeeze of her tiny hand; then, without warning, the moon emerged from behind a cloud – and she saw that only *her* shadow was cast on the lawn. Aghast, she looked up at me in horror, then down at the ground again, searching for my absent shadow; and her train of thought was so legible in her troubled look that I would have burst out in loud laughter had a cold chill not then and there run down my spine.

I let her fall from my arms in a faint, sped like an arrow through the party of horrified guests, reached the gate, threw myself into the first carriage I could flag down and drove back to the city, where this once (to my great misfortune) I had left

the vigilant Bendel behind. He looked aghast when he saw me; one word from me said it all. We ordered a team of horses on the spot. I took only one of my servants with me, a clever conniver named Rascal who succeeded through his guile in making himself indispensable to me, and who could not possibly have had any knowledge of the incident that prompted my departure. I put thirty miles behind me that very night. Bendel stayed behind to liquidate my holdings, distribute the necessary funds and pack up the essentials. When he caught up with me the following day, I threw myself into his arms and swore to him never to commit such a folly again, but to be more careful in the future. We hastened on our way without stopping till we got to the border and crossed a mountain, and only on the far side of the ridge, with nature's bulwark between me and that unlucky place, did I permit myself to rest from the burdensome memory; and so we stopped at a nearby and little-frequented spa.

IV

To cut a long story short, I will, alas, be obliged to pass quickly over a period in the reminiscence of which I would – only too gladly – like to linger, could I but thereby conjure up the ghost of living memory. But the true colours that once gave life to that glorious interlude, colours whose hue alone can resurrect it – those tints have been washed away by time. To seek them out again in the faded palette of my emotions, to dredge up the pain and joy and gentle madness that once made my chest heave – that would be like foolishly striking a boulder in search of a stream that has long since dried up, a parched wellspring abandoned by God. How changed is the bygone time that peers back at me now! It is like a play in which I ought to have tackled an heroic role; yet, being ill prepared, a neophyte on stage, I let myself be distracted from my performance, smitten hopelessly by a pair of blue eyes in the crowd. Her parents, taken in by my charade, pull out all the stops, offer me everything just to make the match and clinch the deal as quickly as possible. And this common farce ends in scorn for the unwitting clown. And that is all, all there is to tell! My words sound fatuous and insipid, and how terrible that the very past that once stirred such profound feeling in my breast could be reduced to this – O Mina! Just as I wept when I lost you back then, I weep now, having lost the shimmer of your memory in me. Has age caught up with me? Oh, wretched reason! Grant me but one more flutter of that fleeting bliss, a moment of sweet madness – but no! I float alone on the bitter, barren foam of time and tide, and have long since downed the last drop of champagne from my goblet!

I had sent Bendel on ahead with several sacks of gold to rent and furnish lodgings for me according to my needs. The good man had scattered much money about, and spoken in the vaguest terms of the noble stranger he served, for I did not wish to be known by name. This heavy veil of mystery gave the good townspeople some curious ideas. As soon as my house was ready for me to move in, Bendel came to fetch me, to accompany me personally to my new home. The two of us set out together.

About an hour's ride from our destination, on a wide, sunny plain, the road was blocked by a crowd decked out in festive finery. The carriage halted. Music, church bells, cannon fire could be heard in the distance, and a loud hurrah rang out in the crowd. A chorus of young girls of exceptional beauty, all dressed in white, advanced towards us, one of whom outshone the others, who faded in her wake like the stars in the night sky in the wake of the rising sun. She stepped forth from among her sisters, and this lofty, delicate apparition knelt down before me, her face flushed crimson. She held out to me on a silken cushion a wreath of braided laurel, olive branch and roses, and proceeded to declaim a few choice words about majesty, reverence and love, words I did not understand, but whose enchanting silvery timbre bewitched my ear and my heart – and it seemed to me as if this heavenly apparition had once before wafted past me. The virginal chorus broke out in an ode to a good king and the happiness of his subjects.

And all this big to-do, dear friend, in broad daylight! There she was, kneeling two steps in front of me, and I, for lack of a shadow, could not bridge the gap between us, could not fall to my knees before that angel. Oh, what wouldn't I have given at that moment for a shadow! I had to keep my shame, my fear and my desperation buried deep in the darkness of my carriage. Bendel finally took the initiative, acting on my behalf; he leapt out of his side of the carriage, but I called him back in the nick of time and, reaching into my jewel box, fished out the first object my fingers happened to touch, a diamond tiara that I had intended to give the lovely Fanny, and handed it to him. He stepped forward and spoke in the name of his master, who neither sought nor desired such reverential treatment – said Bendel: 'There must be some mistake, but let the good townspeople nevertheless be thanked for their kindness.' Thereupon he took up the proffered wreath from its silken pillow and laid the diamond tiara in its place; then he graciously extended a hand to the young girl to rise, and with another courtly sweep of the hand dispensed with the local curate, magistrate and other prominent officials. No one else was permitted to approach me.

Bendel motioned for the throng to part and make room for the horses, swung himself back up into the carriage, and off we went at a gallop, passing under a canopy of wreaths and flowers into the city, while the cannon kept firing in our honour. The carriage stopped in front of my new house; I leapt nimbly past the crowd of onlookers whose curiosity had brought them to my doorstep, and bounded through the door. The crowd hailed me with hurrahs outside my windows and I let gold ducats rain down on them. That evening, of course, the whole town was lit up in celebration.

And I still had no idea what all the to-do was about and who they thought I was. I sent Rascal out to make enquiry. He heard, as he later informed me, that the King of Prussia was travelling through these parts under the assumed alias of a count; that my servant Bendel had supposedly been recognized, revealing his and my identities; and finally, that the townspeople were jubilant to have me settle in their midst. Fathoming at last that I had clearly wished to maintain a strict incognito, they regretted having so impetuously penetrated my disguise. Yet His Highness had

responded with such mercy and grace, surely he would forgive the good hearts of his subjects.

My rogue of a servant found the whole thing so amusing that he did his best, by words of warning dropped for effect, to confirm the people's suspicion. He delivered a hilarious report, and since his delivery made me laugh, he took full advantage of the situation to win me over with his practised guile. Must I admit it? It flattered me to have my lowly person mistaken for the lofty countenance of the king.

For the following evening, I ordered a great feast to be prepared in the shade of the trees in front of my house, to which I invited the entire city. Thanks to the mysterious potential of my purse, Bendel's efforts and Rascal's quick-witted inventiveness, we succeeded in beating the clock. It is astonishing what lavish splendour and beauty we were able to fabricate in a few hours. The extravagance and the excess conjured up! Even the ingenious lighting was so shrewdly distributed that I could move about with ease. My servants had thought of everything, and I had only to dispense well-earned praise.

Evening set in. The guests appeared, and were presented to me. The matter of my purported majesty was never mentioned again, but I was addressed with deep reverence and humility as Sir Count. What was I to do? I let the title stick, and became from that moment Count Peter. Yet amid all that festive fanfare, my soul yearned for her. She came late, she who was and who wore the crown. She followed her parents demurely, and did not seem to know that she was the reigning beauty. The forest warden and his wife and daughter were presented to me. I managed to say many fine and fitting things to the old gentleman, yet before his daughter I stood in awe like a tongue-tied schoolboy and couldn't bring a single word to my lips. Finally, stammering, I bid her honour this occasion and asked her to carry out the duties commensurate with the crown she wore. With a stirring look and blushing with shame, she asked me to excuse her; but, still more ashamed before her than she was before me, I offered my respects as her most humble servant; and a wink from the Count served as a command to all present to commence the revelries, a command that my obedient subjects were quick and eager to carry out. Majesty, innocence and grace aligned with beauty decreed a joyous celebration. Mina's jubilant parents felt honoured by the honour done their child; I myself was in indescribable ecstasy. I ordered all the jewels I had left, all the pearls, all the diamonds, all the precious stones I had purchased just to get rid of some of my gold, to be set out in two covered bowls and passed around in the name of the queen of the day to all her ladies-in-waiting; and meanwhile, handfuls of gold were tossed throughout the evening, over the barriers that had been erected, to the cheering masses.

Next morning Bendel took me aside and revealed to me in confidence his long-held doubt concerning Rascal's reliability, a doubt recently confirmed by the certainty of his guilt. Just yesterday he had discovered whole sacks of gold in Rascal's possession. 'Let us not begrudge the poor rogue his little stash of booty,' I replied; 'my generosity extends to everyone else, why not to him too? Yesterday he

served me well, as did all the new servants you found for me; they joyously helped me celebrate a joyous occasion.'

We spoke no more of this matter. Rascal remained my major-domo, but Bendel was my friend and confidant. Bendel had grown accustomed to regarding my wealth as limitless, and he did not seek out its source; rather, he helped me, in accordance with my own inclinations, to think up a multitude of delightful ways to spend it. But of that mysterious figure, the man in grey, that pale-faced weasel who was the bane of my existence, he knew only this much: through him alone could I be released from the curse that weighed so heavily upon me; in him alone, whom I most feared, did my one hope lie. I should add that I was quite convinced that he, for his part, could find me anywhere, but that I could find him nowhere; and therefore, patiently awaiting the promised day, I forswore any further attempts to track him down.

My comportment and the lavish splendour of the party I had given at first confirmed the unsuspecting local citizenry in their foregone conviction as to my true identity. Soon thereafter, newspapers reported that the entire business concerning the fabulous journey of the King of Prussia through those parts was mere unsubstantiated rumour. Yet, once anointed monarch in the popular imagination, a monarch I was bound to remain, and, moreover, one of the richest and most regal monarchs the world had ever known – though no one could say for certain over what realm I ruled. Still, the world has never had grounds to complain of a lack of kings, least of all in these times; the good people, who had never actually seen a king with their own eyes, traced my provenance now to this place, now to that – Count Peter, in any case, remained Count Peter. Once there appeared among the transient guests of our little spa town a merchant who had declared himself bankrupt only to recoup his fortune, a man who enjoyed public esteem and cast a broad, albeit somewhat pallid, shadow. He wished to make a public display of the wealth he had amassed, and he even had the ill-advised notion of challenging me to measure my fortune against his. I had only to reach into my trusty purse; soon I had the poor braggart so badly beaten that he had once again to declare bankruptcy just to save face, after which he fled in disgrace across the mountains. So I was rid of him. I admit that I attracted the attention of many ne'er-do-wells and idlers in the region.

With all the splendour and extravagance of my festivities, I maintained a very simple household regime and lived apart from the world. I made the most fastidious caution my rule; under no circumstances was anyone but Bendel allowed to enter my private rooms. As long as the sun shone in the sky, I remained locked away with Bendel as my sole companion; word had it that the Count was busy at his desk. In accordance with these arrangements, I had a steady stream of couriers I charged with any trifle continuously coming and going. I received guests only in the evening under my trees or in my great hall, which was brightly illuminated according to Bendel's instructions. And when I went out, with Bendel watching over me like a hawk, my destination was always the forest warden's garden, to see *her*; for love alone plucked at my heartstrings and gave me the will to live.

O my dear old friend Chamisso, I hope that you have not forgotten what love is! I will let you fill in the details here as you see fit. Mina was a truly lovable, kind and devoted child. I had drawn her heart and soul to mine; modest as she was, she had no idea how she had earned the honour of my attentions, and with all the youthful energy of an innocent heart, she returned love for love. She loved in every way just like a woman, giving her all: forgetting herself, dedicating herself without reservation to the man who was her life, even if it meant her own demise; in short, it was true love.

But I, on the other hand – oh, what awful hours I spent! – awful! and yet well worth wishing back – how often I wept on Bendel's breast after the unconscious raptures of love had subsided, when I came to my senses and cast a sharp eye upon myself. How could I, a man without a shadow, so selfishly and deceitfully corrupt such an angel, besmirch and filch her pure soul! At first I resolved to reveal to her the truth about myself; then I swore with solemn oaths to tear myself away from her and escape; then I broke down in tears all over again, forgot my resolve and made arrangements with Bendel that very evening to visit the forest warden's garden.

At times I deceived myself, putting great store in the imminent visit of the grey stranger, and then I wept again and gave up all hope. I had calculated the day on which I was once again to meet that awful man; for he had said it would be a year and a day, and I took him at his word.

Mina's parents were kind, honourable old folk who loved their only child very much; the nature of our involvement, once they fathomed the depth of emotion Mina and I already felt for each other, came as a total surprise to them, and they didn't know what to do. They would never have dreamt that Count Peter might so much as blink an eye at their child; now he was in love with her, and was loved in return. The mother was indeed vain enough to imagine the possibility of a match and to work towards that end, but the old man's healthy common sense could not countenance such far-fetched aspirations. Both were in any case convinced of my pure intentions; they could do nothing but pray for their child. I still have a letter that Mina wrote me back then. Here it is. Word for word!

'What a weak and foolish girl I am – just to imagine that because I love him so very, very much, my beloved would not want to hurt me. Dear heart, you are so good, so unspeakably good to me; but you mustn't, mustn't sacrifice anything for me; O God! how I could hate myself if you ever were to do such a thing. No – you have already made me so immeasurably happy. You taught me how to love you. But enough of this nonsense – I know what lies in store for me, Count Peter belongs not to me but to the world. I'll be proud just to hear: that was him, and that was him again, and this is what he achieved; and that those people revere him and others worship him. You see, just let me start thinking these thoughts, and I could be furious with you for forgetting your proud destiny in the arms of a simple-minded child.

'Enough! Better stop, or the thought of you may yet make me sad, you, oh you! who have made me so happy, so very happy. Have I not also woven an olive branch and a rosebud in your life, as in the wreath that I was privileged to pass to you? I

will always have you here in my heart, my beloved, so don't be afraid to leave me. Dear God, I could die, you've made me so happy, so unspeakably happy.'

You can well imagine how these words cut me to the quick. I tried to explain to her that I was not who people thought I was, that I was nothing but a rich, if miserable, man. A curse was upon me, the nature of which would have to remain a secret between us for the moment, since I had not yet given up all hope of its being lifted. This curse was the poison of my days; and heaven forbid that I drag her along with me into the abyss, she who was the only light, the only joy, the very heartbeat of my life. Then she wept again at my unhappiness. Dear God, she was so loving, so good! Just to save me a single tear, that blessed child, she would have sacrificed herself. In truth, she was far from fathoming the real meaning of my words; she imagined me to be the scion of a noble dynasty, a grand and respected ruler struck down by some ill-fated happenstance, and her active imagination sketched out an elaborate heroic backdrop for the portrait of her beloved.

Once again I said to her, 'Mina, dear, the last day of the coming month may alter and decide my fate; if things go badly, then I must die, for I could not bear to make you unhappy.' She buried her tear-stained face in my arms. 'Should destiny rule in your favour, just let me know that you are well, I have no claim on you. But if misery is to be your lot, then bind me to you so that I may help you bear it.'

'My dear girl, take back those rash and foolish words – do you know the misery of which you speak, can you picture the curse? Do you know who your beloved – who he – is? Can't you see how I'm standing here shuddering before you, carrying the burden of a terrible secret?' She fell sobbing at my feet, and with solemn oaths repeated her plea.

To the forest warden, who at that very moment happened upon us, I declared my intention of asking his daughter's hand in marriage on the first day of the next month. I specified the time and date, explaining that certain things might happen between now and then that could have a hand in my fate. The only certainty was my love for his daughter.

The good man was considerably taken aback to hear such words from the mouth of Count Peter. He hugged me to him, and immediately thereafter felt mightily ashamed to have lost control of himself. Then doubt entered his mind, followed by deliberation and paternal concern; he spoke of the dowry, of security and of his worry above all for the future of his beloved child. I thanked him for bringing all these matters to my attention. I informed him that I wished to settle permanently here where I appeared to be so popular, and that I hoped to lead a carefree life. I bid him acquire in his daughter's name the finest properties available in the area, and to charge the purchase price to me. It was in this way, I said, that a father could best serve the happy couple. This gave him much to do, as wherever he turned some stranger had good land to offer; he restricted himself to the purchase of a mere million-worth of property.

I occupied him with this as an innocent ploy to get him out of our way for a while; I had already used other such ruses, for I must admit that the old man could become a little tiresome. The mother, on the other hand, was somewhat deaf, and

not, like her husband, avidly eager to entertain the Count.

The mother then came out to join us, and together the old people urged me to stay a while longer, but I did not have a moment to lose, for already I spotted the moon rising over the horizon. My time was up.

The following evening, I once again set out for the forest warden's garden. I had draped my coat broadly over my shoulders and pulled my hat down low over my eyes as I eagerly approached Mina. When she looked up and saw me, she started back with an involuntary jerk; then it came to me again, the spectre of that terrible night on which I had shown myself in the moonlight without a shadow. It was she, no doubt about it. But did she put two and two together and realize who I was? She grew silent and reflective. My worry weighed like a millstone on my chest; I sat down, and got up again. Silently weeping, she threw herself into my arms. I took my leave.

After that, I often found her in tears; I myself sank ever deeper into the darkness of my soul. Only her parents seemed to swim in boundless jubilation; the fateful day drew near, dark and dreadful as a storm cloud. Then it was night before I could scarcely draw a breath. I had prudently filled several chests with gold, just in case; I lay awake awaiting midnight. At last the clock struck twelve.

Eyes glued to the hands of the clock, each passing minute like a dagger thrust in my heart, I sat there, starting at the slightest sound. And so I welcomed daybreak. The leaden hours rolled on, one, two, three, each displaced by the next; then it was noon, evening, night; the clock hands shifted, hope faded; the clock struck eleven, and no one appeared; the last minutes of the last hour of the day ticked by, and still no one; the first stroke of midnight, the twelfth stroke, and I fell back soaking the cover of my couch in desperate and unending tears. For tomorrow I, an ill-fated shadow-less man, was to ask for the hand of my beloved. Towards morning a heavy sleep finally pressed my eyes shut.

V

It was still early when I awoke to the sound of heated voices raised in a quarrel in my antechamber. I listened carefully. Bendel stood at my door blocking entry, as Rascal, swearing up and down that he would take no orders from a mere lackey, demanded entry into my room. Kind-hearted Bendel warned him that should such words reach my ears, he would risk the loss of a very favourable position. Rascal threatened to use force if Bendel continued to bar his entry.

I threw on some clothes, angrily flung open the door and spoke to Rascal in a rage. 'What do you want with me, you lout?'

He stepped back two paces and responded coldly, 'What I want, sir, is to humbly request that you show me your shadow – the sun is just up, and shining so brightly in the yard.'

I stood there shaken to the core. It took me a while to find words. 'How in heaven's name can a servant speak so … so … so rudely to his master?'

He calmly and quietly replied, 'A servant can stand on his honour and refuse to serve a shadow-less master. I demand forthwith my release, and tender my

resignation.'

I was forced to try another tack. 'But Rascal, dear Rascal, who ever gave you such a ridiculous idea? How can you even think—?'

He continued in the same tone of voice: 'Certain people claim that you have no shadow, sir – in short, either show me your shadow or hand me my release.'

Pale and trembling, but with more presence of mind than I had at the moment, Bendel motioned to me. I sought to appease Rascal with the gold I had lying about; that too had lost its power. He threw it back at my feet: 'I take no alms from a shadow-less man.' He spun round on his heels, put his hat on his head and slowly waltzed out of the door, whistling a tune. Motionless and without a thought in my mind as if turned to stone, I stood staring after him with Bendel at my side.

With a heavy sigh and death in my heart, I finally pulled myself together and, slinking along like a thief preparing to face judgment, I made my way to the forest warden's garden. I stepped through the shady bower that had been named after me, and where no doubt I was expected. The old mother came towards me carefree and cheerful as ever. Mina sat there, pale and lovely as the first snow that sometimes in late autumn bestows a kiss on the last flowers of summer before melting into bitter dew. The forest warden paced up and down, clutching a handwritten note, and appeared to be doing his best to repress a surge of emotion that erupted the moment he spotted me, now in a flush of red, now with a deathlike pallor clouding his otherwise lacklustre face. He approached me as I entered the garden and haltingly requested a word with me alone. The *allée* along which he invited me to follow him led to an open, sunny corner of the garden. Without a word I sank on a bench. A long silence followed that not even the kindly mother dared break.

The forest warden kept pacing with uneven steps up and down the bower; suddenly he came up to me and stood before me in a numb silence, staring down at the sheet of paper in his hand. With a piercing look, he asked me, 'I wonder, Sir Count, if you may not be acquainted with a certain Peter Schlemiel?' I said nothing. 'A man of impeccable character and incomparable gifts.' He clearly expected an answer.

'And what if I myself happened to be he?'

'The man,' he added with a dark intensity, 'who misplaced his shadow!'

'I knew it, I knew it!' cried Mina, 'I've known it for a long time, he has no shadow!' And with that she threw herself into the arms of her horrified mother, who held her close, reproaching her for having kept such an unhappy secret to herself. But like Arethusa, the poor girl became a fountain of tears that erupted at the sound of my voice, gushing forth uncontrollably at my approach and accompanied by convulsive sobs.

'How could you,' the forest warden went on angrily, 'how could you have the utter gall to deceive this dear girl and me in such an unscrupulous manner; you who claim to love her, and have dragged her so low? See how she's weeping and wringing her hands! What an awful thing you've done!'

I was in such a state that I started talking nonsense. 'A shadow is after all nothing but a shadow,' I said, 'one can just as well do without it, why make such a fuss?'

And yet I felt so profoundly the insincerity of my words that I cut myself short without waiting for an answer. I did, however, point out that a thing lost may yet be found again.

The old man replied in anger, ‘Admit it, sir, own up to the truth! How did you lose your shadow?’

I had to invent another lie. ‘Why, not so very long ago, an uncouth burly fellow stamped so vehemently on my shadow that he tore a big hole in it. I was obliged to have it repaired – money talks, you know; I was supposed to get it back from the tailor yesterday.’

‘Well and good, well and good!’ the forest warden replied. ‘You’ve come a-courting my daughter; well, you’re not the only one. As her father, I must look out for her best interests. I give you three days to acquire a shadow; if in three days’ time you appear here before me wearing a well-fitting shadow, you will be welcome; but on the fourth day – mark my word! – my daughter will be wed to another.’ I still wanted to say something to Mina, but she clasped her mother’s hand all the more tightly and sobbed all the louder, so that the old woman silently motioned to me to make myself scarce. I staggered off, and it was as if the world itself were closing its gates behind me.

Having eluded Bendel’s loving vigilance, I ran through the forests and fields at a mad pace. The cold sweat of terror ran down my brow, I heaved an abysmal sigh, my mind tottered on the brink of madness.

I can’t say how much time elapsed before I found myself in a sunny field. I felt a tug at my sleeve. Standing stock-still, I looked around. It was the man in the grey coat, who appeared to be out of breath from chasing after me. He immediately spoke up.

‘I announced my arrival for this very day, but you were too impatient to wait. Don’t worry, my friend, it’s not too late. Take my advice – for a fair trade you can have your shadow back and do an immediate about-turn in life. The forest warden will welcome you back with open arms, and this whole unhappy business will be treated as a bad joke. And that Rascal who betrayed you and who this very minute is wooing your bride-to-be, I’ll take him into my service where he belongs – the fellow’s ripe for the picking.’

In a daze, I repeated his words. ‘Announced your arrival for this very day—?’ I mentally recalculated the allotted time. He was right, I had been a day off. With my right hand, I felt for the purse dangling under my shirt against my breast. He immediately guessed my intent and stepped back two paces.

‘Oh no, Sir Count, the purse is in good hands as it is, it’s yours to keep.’ Astonished, I gave him a befuddled, questioning look, to which he replied forthwith, ‘All I ask for is a little token, a memento, if you will: your signature, sir, on this document will do.’ And on the parchment he held in his hands I read the following:

‘By my signature I empower the recipient of this parchment to take full claim to my soul following its natural separation from my body.’

Dumbfounded, I kept looking back and forth between the document and the grey stranger. Meanwhile, with a freshly cut quill, he proceeded to dab the open wound a thorn had torn in my hand, wet the tip with a drop of blood and passed the pen to me.

'Who in God's name are you?' I asked at last.

'What difference does it make?' he replied. 'Can't you tell by looking at me? I'm just a poor devil, a sort of sage and alchemist who gets little thanks from his friends for his incomparable wizardry exercised on their behalf, and whose sole pleasure on earth is a little experimentation. But hurry up and sign before the blood dries up. Bottom right: Peter Schlemiel.'

I shook my head and said, 'Forgive me, sir, this document I cannot sign.'

'Not sign?' he repeated, surprised. 'But why not?'

'It seems a somewhat questionable transaction, to exchange my soul for my shadow.'

'Questionable indeed!' he replied, and broke into loud, sarcastic laughter. 'And if I may ask, what sort of thing is that, your soul? Have you ever seen it? What possible use do you intend to make of it once you're dead? You ought to be pleased to have found a collector during your lifetime who's willing to buy the nebulous bequest of X, that galvanic force of polarizing potential, or whatever you prefer to call that ridiculous thing; a collector who proposed to take that tenuous trifle off your hands in exchange for something real, namely, your shadow, the very thing you need to attain the hand of your beloved and make all your dreams come true. Or would you rather be the one to hand her over – nay! – to veritably *push* that poor thing into the arms of that low scoundrel, Rascal? No, my friend, better see it for yourself; here then, let me lend you this magic hood' (he pulled something out of his pocket) 'and together we'll make our way unseen to the forest warden's garden.'

I must admit that I felt terribly ashamed to be derided by this man. I loathed him from the bottom of my heart, and it was this personal revulsion, I believe, much more than any principles or prejudices, that prevented me from buying back my shadow, however much I needed it, for the price of that signature. How distasteful, the very thought of accepting his proposition to take a stroll together! Just the idea of seeing that slimy weasel, that sniggering devil, standing between me and my beloved, two bleeding hearts torn asunder – that was more than I could bear. What's done is done, I decided, and, turning to the man, I said, 'Sir, I did indeed sell my shadow for this admittedly splendid purse, and I have come ruefully to regret it. In God's name, will you take it back!' He shook his head and gave me a very dark look. So I continued, 'In that case, I have no intention of selling you any more of what's mine, be it for the price of my shadow, and I cannot, I'm afraid, sign the contract. And furthermore, you must realize that a hooded hike in your company would prove far more amusing to you than to me; therefore, please allow me to decline your kind invitation, which concludes our business together – and so let us go our separate ways!'

'I regret very much, Monsieur Schlemiel, that you should be so thick-headed as to reject out of hand the proposition I made as a token of friendship. Better luck

next time, then. I do hope we will meet again soon! Oh, by the way, permit me to show you that I by no means let the things I buy grow musty, but rather take great pains to preserve them – please be assured of my fastidious care!'

He proceeded to pull my shadow out of his pocket and, with a skilful toss, unfurled it on the heath and spread it out on the sunny side at his feet so that he could stride up and down in between the two shadows, his and mine; mine had to obey, to twist and turn in accordance with his every move. When I first caught a glimpse of my poor shadow after such a long time and saw it reduced to such a lowly purpose – as for its sake I too was made to suffer such unspeakable misery – my heart broke, and I burst into bitter tears. That hateful man proudly paraded around with his booty and shamelessly repeated his offer:

'You can still have it for the asking; just a stroke of the pen and His Highness the Count can save his poor unhappy Mina from the claws of that lout, Rascal, and take her in his arms – as I said, just a stroke of the pen.' My tears burst forth with renewed vigour, but I turned away and with a wave of my hand bade him adieu.

At that very moment Bendel, who had been anxiously following my footsteps, appeared on the scene. As soon as that faithful, God-fearing man found me in tears and spotted my shadow – for it was unmistakably mine – in the thrall of that awful grey stranger, he immediately resolved to get back for me what was mine, even if by force; and since he had no idea of how to grasp the insubstantial thing itself, he let fly a flurry of angry words and, without beating about the bush, demanded that the shadow be returned to its rightful owner. In lieu of an answer, the stranger simply turned his back on my innocent defender, whereupon Bendel raised the thorny club in his hand and followed hot on the grey man's heels, repeating his demand to give up the shadow, pummelling him mercilessly with all his might. The latter, as though well accustomed to such treatment, merely ducked his head, hunched his shoulders and calmly, quietly continued on his way across the heath, robbing me of both my shadow and my faithful servant. For a very long time I heard the dull thud resounding until finally it faded in the distance. I was all alone again with my bitter fate.

VI

Alone on the barren moor, I let loose a torrent of tears, relieving my heart if but for a moment of the inexpressible burden of my fate. I saw no end to the misery that overwhelmed me, no exit, no way out, and I sucked with a grim thirst on the new poison that stranger had poured into my wounds. When I pictured Mina in my mind's eye and her dear sweet face appeared to me pale and drowned in tears, as I had last seen her in the hour of my disgrace, Rascal's impudent, sneering visage stepped between us; I buried my face in my hands and ran wildly across the desolate terrain, but I couldn't shake off that terrible spectre, it followed me wherever I fled, until, breathless, I sank to the ground and once again burst into tears.

All for the sake of a shadow! And the mere stroke of a pen could buy me that shadow back! I mulled over the stranger's disconcerting proposition, as well as my

reluctance. My mind was a blur, I had lost all capacity to judge or comprehend.

The day drew to an end. I stilled my hunger with wild berries, my thirst in a mountain stream; night fell, and I took refuge under a tree. The damp dawn woke me from a heavy sleep, in which I had overheard my own death rattle. Bendel must have lost my trail, and I was glad of it; I wanted nothing more to do with my fellow man, from whom I had fled in terror like the frightened beasts of the wild. Three desolate days I spent in hiding.

On the morning of the fourth day I found myself on a sandy plain on which the sun shone brightly. I was seated on a pile of rocks with the sun in my face, for I now craved the very sunbath I had so long done without. My heart supped in silence on the source of my despair. Then a faint sound startled me; prepared for escape, I cast a furtive look around. I saw no one; and yet, on the sunny stretch of sand, a human shadow came ambling by, a shadow not unlike my own, a shadow strolling all alone, which appeared to have lost its master.

Then a mighty urge arose in me. Shadow, thought I, if it's a master you're searching for, consider me him. And I leapt forward in an attempt to overtake it. I was convinced, you see, that if I succeeded in stepping into its path so that it made contact with my feet, the shadow would remain stuck there and in time grow accustomed to me.

But as I advanced, the shadow took flight, and I was obliged to give wearisome chase to that fleet-footed quarry. Only the thought of my intolerable condition gave me the energy to press on. The elusive fugitive was heading for a forest in the distance, in the shadow of which I would naturally have lost him. The prospect of his escape made my heart flutter with horror, sharpened my resolve, accelerated my pace. I was visibly gaining on him, coming closer and closer – I simply had to catch him. Then suddenly he stopped and turned to me. Like the lion upon its prey, I bounded with a mighty leap to make him mine – and struck unexpectedly against physical resistance. From no visible source I received the most violent jab in the ribs that ever a man endured.

Fear impelled me involuntarily to clamp shut my arms before me, seizing the unseen presence. That swift gesture made me lunge forward and tumble to the ground; only now did the man lying beneath me prone on his back, and whom I held fast, become visible. Now the whole mysterious business became eminently clear to me. That man must first have been carrying, then dropped, the magic invisible bird's nest, the one that rendered invisible whoever happens to be holding it, but not his shadow. I cast a long look around and soon discovered the shadow of the invisible bird's nest, bounded up at it and captured my precious prey. Invisible and shadow-less, I held that nest in my hands.

The unfortunate man, now starkly visible on the wide, sunny plain, sat up forthwith and peered about, looking for the thief, but spotted neither him nor his shadow; the absence of the latter made him particularly anxious. Fleeing from me, he failed to notice, and could hardly be expected to imagine that I was shadow-less to begin with. Once he convinced himself that there was not a trace of me anywhere, he took out his extreme consternation on himself, and tugged and tore at

his hair in despair. I, on the other hand, was invigorated by this newly acquired treasure, which gave me at once the ability and the desire once again to seek out human company. I was perfectly inured to any sense of guilt, and felt neither the slightest remorse at having committed an act of common thievery nor the need to excuse myself, and so as to elude any guilt-engendering train of thought, I hurried off without looking back at the poor unfortunate, whose piteous cries kept echoing in my ears. This, at any rate, is how it all seemed to me at the time.

I was burning with desire to return to the forest warden's garden to find out for myself the truth of what the hateful one had revealed to me, but I had no idea where I was. I clambered up a nearby hill to take a look around. From the top of the hill I spotted the little town a mere stone's throw away, and the forest warden's garden lying right there at my feet. My heart started pounding furiously, and tears of another sort from those I had lately shed welled up: I was going to see her again. A longing full of misgivings quickened my step as I went bounding down the path to her house. I passed unnoticed a group of peasants on their way home from town. They spoke of me, of Rascal and of the forest warden; I did not want to hear what they had to say, and hurried on.

I entered the garden with the horror of anticipation seething in my breast. The sound of laughter rang out in my ear; shuddering, I cast a quick look around. There was no one in sight. I stepped forward and heard what seemed like the sound of footsteps nearby, but no one was there; my ears must be deceiving me, I thought. It was still early, no one was up and about in Count Peter's arbour, the garden was still deserted; I hastened down the familiar paths and made my way to the house. The same sound, now more distinct, kept following me. With a trembling heart I sat down on an empty bench in a sunny niche facing the front door. I swear I heard that unseen devil laughing scornfully as he sat himself down beside me. A key turned in the lock, the door opened, the forest warden stepped out with papers in hand. I felt as though a fog had descended over my head, I looked around, and – horror of horrors! – the man in the grey coat was seated there beside me eyeing me with a satanic grin. He had draped his magic hood over his head and mine, and at his feet his shadow and mine lay peacefully side by side. He fiddled absently with the sheet of parchment in his hand, and as the forest warden started pacing up and down in the shadow of the arbour with his own papers in hand, he leant forward with an air of familiarity and whispered in my ear:

'You really ought to have accepted my invitation, we'd only be seated as we are now, two heads under one hood. So be it! So be it! But how about giving me back my bird's nest? You have no more need of it now and are far too honourable a gentleman to want to withhold something that does not by rights belong to you – and of course I expect no gratitude, I assure you, for I'd have been more than happy to lend it to you.' Without batting an eye, he took the nest out of my hand, stuffed it into his pocket, and laughed at me again – indeed so loudly that the forest warden looked up at the sound. I sat there riveted to the spot.

'You must after all admit,' he continued, 'that a hood like this one is far more convenient. For it hides not only the man but his shadow as well, and as many other

shadows as he cares to take under his wing. You will notice,' he said, 'that today I once again have two shadows on the leash.' He laughed again. 'Remember this, Schlemiel – what at first you refuse to do of your own free will you will be forced to agree to in the end. Why not buy the thing back and retrieve your bride – there's still time, I assure you – and together we'll see that Rascal swinging on the gallows where he belongs, that'd be an easy matter as long as there's rope enough to hold him. And I'll tell you what, I'll throw in my magic hood as part of the deal.'

The old mother followed her husband out of the house, and the conversation began. 'How is Mina?'

'She's crying.'

'Oh, that foolish child! What's done is done!'

'I know, but to give her so soon to another – Father, how can you be so cruel to your own child!'

'No, Mother, you've got the wrong idea. If before having wept her last childish tear she finds herself wed to a rich and honourable man, why, she'll wake relieved out of her misery as out of a bad dream, and she'll thank God and her parents for it, mark my word!'

'God willing!'

'She may now possess considerable assets, but after all the uproar of that unhappy affair with the adventurer has died down, do you really think she'd ever be likely to find so soon as good a match as Mr Rascal? Do you have any idea how rich he is, this Mr Rascal? He owns property hereabouts worth six million, no mortgages, all paid for in cash. I held the deeds in my own hands! It was he who beat me to the choice pickings everywhere; and in addition to that, he has IOUs from Mr Thomas John for about four and a half million.'

'He must have stolen a lot.'

'How can you talk like that! He saved wisely where others tossed money to the wind.'

'He was a livery servant by trade.'

'Nonsense! Does he not possess an impeccable shadow?'

'Maybe you're right, but—'

The man in the grey coat laughed and looked at me. The door flew open, and out stepped Mina. She was leaning on the arm of a lady-in-waiting; quiet tears ran down her lovely pale cheeks. She lowered herself into a chair that had been set out for her under the linden trees, and her father pulled up a chair beside her. He gently took her hand in his, and spoke to her in a kindly voice as she burst into another fit of weeping.

'You are my good, sweet child, you'll be sensible, I'm sure, and won't disappoint your dear old father who has nothing but your happiness at heart. I understand, my dear, how deeply upset you are, but a lucky turn of events allowed you to elude your misfortune! I know, before we discovered his shameful charade, how much you loved that no-good cad; you see, Mina, I do not fault you for the depth of your feelings. I myself, dear child, was deceived by him, I loved him too, so long as I took him for a noble personage. But now you yourself must admit that everything

has changed. For heaven's sake, every humble dog has a shadow, and to think that my beloved child should wed a man who – no, you must put him out of your mind at once. Listen, Mina, a gentleman has come to woo you, a man not afraid to be seen in broad daylight, an honourable man, who may not be a count, but he's worth ten million, ten times more than you own, a man who will make my beloved child happy. Don't contradict me now, don't oppose my will, just be my sweet, obedient daughter, and permit your loving father to fend for you, and dry those tears. Promise me that you will agree to marry Mr Rascal. Now then, will you give me your word?'

She replied in a muffled murmur, 'I have no more will of my own, no further wish on earth. Let my father do with me as he wants.'

At that very moment, Rascal was announced and strode impudently into their midst. Mina collapsed in a faint. My hated companion gave me an angry look. 'How could you let this happen! Is it blood or water you have running through your veins?' With a rapid motion, he scratched a surface wound in my hand, I bled, and he continued, 'Red blood indeed! Now then, sign!' And he thrust the parchment and quill into my hands.

VII

I will defer to your judgement, dear Chamisso, and not attempt to sway you with sweet lies. I myself have long weighed my guilt, nurturing the torturous worm of conscience in my heart. This solemn moment of my life kept hovering before me as if it were only yesterday, and I could only bear to look askance at it with contrition and humility. Dear friend, whosoever frivolously sets foot on the straight and narrow path intending to persevere, he will be lured unexpectedly down other byways that lead him downwards and ever downwards to his doom; to no avail are the guiding lights he may glimpse shimmering in the night sky, he has no choice but to keep right on walking into the abyss, to sacrifice himself to the ineluctable nemesis of his deeds. Following that impetuous error that brought this curse on me, trifling with love, I callously ploughed into the destiny of another; and there where I had despoiled goodness, where only a quick move could save the day, what else could I do but leap blindly to the rescue? For the final hour had struck.

Don't think so badly of me, Adelbert, as to suppose that any price would have seemed too dear, that I would have skimped on anything in my possession, be it goods or gold. No, Adelbert; but my soul was filled with insurmountable loathing for that inscrutable creature who had led me down the crooked path. It may be that I did him an injustice, but I could not bear to have any further truck with him. And here again, as so often before in my life, and in the history of the world for that matter, happenstance took the place of action. Years later I finally made peace with myself. I first had to learn to respect necessity – what's done is done, what's happened has happened, the past is a fait accompli. And then I learnt to respect this necessity in and of itself as the wise and providential force that holds sway over the whole grand scheme of things, the machinery in which we are but inconsequential cogs, driven and driving through no will of our own; what must be must be, and

what had to happen happened, and all is governed by that providential force that I finally learnt to honour as the master of my destiny and the destiny of those who crossed my path.

I don't know if I ought to ascribe it to the strain on my soul in the sway of such mighty emotions or to my state of total exhaustion, drained as I was by the unceasing travail of the past few days, or to the destructive agitation stirred up in my very nature by the proximity of that grey fiend – for whatever reason, I fell unconscious when the time came to sign, and for a long time I lay as if in death's embrace.

The sounds of stamping and cursing were the first to strike my ear as I came to again. I opened my eyes and it was dark; my hated companion was busy rebuking me. 'Carrying on like an old woman! We had best pull ourselves together and make good our resolve, or have we had a change of heart and would rather lie here blubbering?' With great effort I sat up on the ground where I had lain and silently peered about. It was late evening, and festive music emanated from the lighted windows of the forest warden's house as small groups of celebrants strolled up and down the paths in the garden. One couple stepped closer and sat down on the bench on which I had previously been seated. They spoke of the marriage that had taken place that very morning between the wealthy Mr Rascal and the daughter of the household. So it had finally happened.

I brushed off my head the magic hood of invisibility the mysterious stranger had laid upon it, whereupon he immediately disappeared and I, in turn, hurried off in silence to bury myself in the dark wall of bushes. Making my way to Count Peter's bower, I approached the garden gate. Invisible all the while, my tormentor kept hounding me with sharp words. 'So this is the thanks I get for all my efforts on your behalf, Monsieur, with your weak nerves, the thanks for nursing you the whole day long. And I thought we'd dropped the joker from our deck. Very well, Mr Thickhead, you just go on trying to elude me, don't you know we're inseparable, as thick as two thieves? You have my gold and I have your shadow; that tightens the bond between us. Has anyone ever heard of a shadow forsaking its master? Yours keeps me tied to you, until you mercifully take it back and rid me of its burden. What you failed to do of your own free will you'll have to do anyway – too late alas – in disgust and ennui; you can't escape your fate.' He kept jabbering on and on in the same scornful tone. I fled, but for naught; forever present, he kept bending my ear about his gold and my shadow. I couldn't even hear myself think.

Slinking along down deserted streets, I made my way home. When at last I stood before it, staring at the once-familiar façade, it was scarcely recognizable; not a single light burned behind its shattered windows. The doors were shut, no servants stirred within. That awful voice laughed out loud beside me. 'That's the way it is, my friend! If it's any consolation, you'll find your faithful Bendel within; they brought him home in such a state that I'm quite sure he hasn't set foot outside since.' He laughed again. 'The old duffer'll have a few stories to tell! Very well then! Farewell for now, see you soon!'

I rang and knocked repeatedly; at last a light went on. ‘Who’s there?’ Bendel enquired from within. When the good man heard my voice, he could scarcely control his emotions; the door flew open, and we ran weeping into each other’s arms. I found him changed, weak and sickly, but then I too had turned grey.

He led me through the ravaged rooms to an inner chamber that had been spared the fury of the crowd. He brought me food and drink, we sat down, and again he burst out weeping. He told me that he had pursued and wrestled so long with the man in grey, whom he’d spotted in possession of my shadow, determined as he was to wrest it from him, that he lost all trace of me and finally collapsed in exhaustion. Afterwards, unable as he was to find a trace of me anywhere, he returned to look after my property, when a mob, on Rascal’s instigation, stormed the door, smashed the windows and raged and looted to their hearts’ content. This was how they repaid the kindness of their benefactor. My servants took flight. The local constabulary forthwith declared me *persona non grata* and gave me twenty-four hours to pack up and leave. Moreover, he filled me in on the details I did not know of Rascal’s material acquisition and precipitous matrimony. That cunning scoundrel, the instigator of all the misfortunes that had befallen me here, must have known my secret from the very beginning; it appears that, attracted by the lure of gold, he managed to ingratiate himself with me. At the start he obtained a duplicate key to the cabinet in which I kept all my gold and, drawing freely thereupon, built his considerable fortune, to which he is still slyly adding to this day.

All this Bendel told me amid abundant tears, whereupon he wept again out of joy, this time to see me again, to have me there; having himself long despaired of establishing my whereabouts, wherever fate may have led me, he was happy to see me calmly and resolutely enduring my misfortune. For such was the expression that despair had carved in my face. I saw my misery, giant and immovable, towering before me; I had shed all my tears, not another moan could that spectre squeeze from my breast; bare-headed, I bore my sorrow with the coldness and equanimity of a man who has nothing left to lose.

‘Bendel,’ I said, ‘you know what lies in store for me. For the debts I amassed so blithely I must now pay a bitter interest. You are an innocent man, and must no longer bind your fate to mine; I cannot permit it. This very night will I ride off. Saddle my horse, for I ride alone; you must stay here, I insist. Surely there are still a few chests of gold lying about – they’re yours. I will henceforth follow my restless path alone; but should I ever again be graced with a glimmering of joy, and fortune smiles on me once more, then will I think of you again, for I wept on your breast in this, my heaviest, bitterest hour.’

With a broken heart, that faithful honest man had to do his master’s bidding this one last time, though his very soul shuddered at such a request. I turned a deaf ear to his pleading, I was blind to his tears, and he brought me the horse I asked for. One last time did I press his tear-filled face to my breast; then I swung myself up into the saddle and fled in the cloak of darkness from the grave of my life, little caring which direction my horse might choose; for I had no further destination on this earth, no wish, no hope.

VIII

A man on foot soon joined me. After he had walked a while beside my horse, he asked, seeing that we were headed in the same direction, if he might not rest his heavy coat on my horse's rear flanks; I acceded without a word. He thanked me for the kindness, praised my horse, took the opportunity to laud the fortune and power of the rich, and so launched into a kind of conversation with himself for which I served as a mere listening ear.

He elaborated his views on life and matters of worldly consequence, and soon came to the subject of metaphysics, challenging himself to find the key to all mysteries. He expounded with great clarity, and hastened to venture a reply to himself: 'You know, my friend, that though I once fancied myself a student of ideas, I have long acknowledged a lack of aptitude for philosophical speculation, and abandoned the field; since then I have let many matters rest, forsworn trying to know and understand everything, trusting instead, on your sound advice, my own instincts, the voice within, and have, in so far as I was able, followed my own path.'

So it seemed to me that this able and articulate rhetorician skilfully built a solid, self-sustaining argument supported by its own inner necessity. Yet to me it was altogether lacking in the very substance I would have liked to find, and thus I took it as a bit of mere artifice whose elegant closure and conclusiveness offered nothing but empty delight to the mind's eye; but I was glad nonetheless to listen intently, for my eloquent companion took my mind off my own misery, and I would just as willingly have given way had he attempted to lay claim to my soul as to my reason.

Meanwhile, time had rushed forward, and, without my noticing it, dawn had already begun to brighten the night sky. I fell into a panic, when all at once I looked up and saw in the east the burst of colour heralding imminent sunrise; and now, at the hour when the first shadows fall in all their ostentatious splendour, there was no protection, no refuge in sight on the open plain! And I was not alone! I looked back at my companion, and once again shuddered in fright. It was none other than the man in the grey coat.

He chuckled in amusement at my dumbfounded expression, and continued without letting me get a word in edgeways. 'Come now, let our mutual benefit unite us for a while, as is only customary in this world; there's always time to part ways. This road skirting the mountain, in case you didn't realize it right away, is the only one you could possibly take; you dare not descend into the valley, much less turn back across the mountain to where you came from – and it just so happens to be my road too. You're already blanching with horror at the prospect of the sunrise. Let me lend you back your shadow for the duration of our journey together, and all you need do in exchange is countenance my company. You no longer have your faithful Bendel; let me serve you in his stead. You don't like me, I know, and that makes me sad. My help may nevertheless still come in handy. The devil is not as black as they like to paint him. True, you annoyed me yesterday, but I won't hold it against you today, and I have after all made the road seem shorter, this you must admit. Why don't you just try your shadow back on for size?'

The sun had risen, people were approaching us on the road; I accepted his proposition, albeit reluctantly. Grinning, he let my shadow unravel and fall to the ground, and it immediately took its place beside the horse's shadow, both of them trotting merrily along. How strange I felt. I rode past a party of country bumpkins, who doffed their hats and humbly made way for a man of means. I rode on, peering down with a greedy eye and a beating heart at the shadow, formerly mine, which I had just borrowed back from a stranger, indeed from my mortal enemy.

Bemused, indifferent to my chagrin, he strode beside me, absent-mindedly whistling a little tune. He on foot, I on horseback – the giddiness of the idea went to my head, the temptation was too great. All of a sudden I seized the reins, dug in with my spurs and made a mad dash for it. The shadow, however, refused to follow, but pivoted free of the horse and paused, awaiting the arrival of its rightful owner. Red-faced with shame, I was obliged to turn back, while the man in the grey coat calmly finished whistling his little ditty and, laughing at me, reattached the shadow and warned that it would stick to my feet and stay with me only when I could again lay claim to it as my rightful possession. 'I've got you by your shadow,' he continued, 'no sense trying to escape. A rich man like you needs a respectable shadow, there's no getting around it; it's just too bad you didn't see reason long ago.'

I continued my journey along the same road; once again I enjoyed the amenities of life, delighting in the simple fact of existence; I was free to move about as I pleased, since I possessed, if but on temporary loan, a bona fide shadow, and everywhere my appearance instilled the respect that wealth accords; and yet I carried death in my heart. My strange companion, who pretended to be a lowly servant of the richest man on earth, proved exceptionally adept at obsequious behaviour; he was the very epitome of a rich man's lackey. But he never left my side, kept heaping scorn upon me, foreseeing with complete confidence the day when I would finally, if only to be rid of him, clinch the deal and offer my soul in exchange for my shadow.

His company was as burdensome to me as it was loathsome. I had good reason to fear him, for I had made myself dependent on him. After leading me back to the splendour of the world from which I had fled, he held me once again in his grip. I was obliged to endure his never-ending verbal assault, and I very nearly became convinced that he was right. A rich man must have a shadow in this world, and as soon as I sought to lay claim to the social standing to which, lured back by the devil, I once again aspired, I had only one option. And yet I stood firm in my resolve: having sacrificed my love, now that life itself had paled, I would not sell my soul to this creature for all the shadows in the world. But how was all this to end?

We were sitting upon an overlook to which all travellers passing across these mountains pay a visit. You can hear the surging of underground streams bubbling up from immeasurable depths, and a stone tossed over the edge falls and falls without, it seems, ever striking the bottom. With a dizzying imaginative prowess and the shimmering dazzle of all the colours in his palette, my companion depicted for me,

as was often his wont, in painstaking detail all the pleasures I would enjoy with the aid of my purse, if only I once again had possession of my shadow. My elbows propped upon my knees, I buried my face in my hands and listened to that false deceiver, my heart divided between the desire to succumb and the force of my will-power. I had come to the end of my rope, no longer able to endure such inner turmoil, and so I began the decisive final struggle: 'You appear to forget, sir, that though I may have permitted you under certain circumstances to remain in my company, I retained the right of complete freedom of movement.'

'Say the word and I'll be gone.' This threat was often repeated. I remained silent; he immediately proceeded to roll up my shadow. I turned pale, but I let it happen without a word. A long silence followed. He was the first to break it.

'You cannot abide me, sir; you hate me, I know; but why do you hate me? Is it perhaps because you assaulted me on the open road with the intent of robbing me of my bird's nest? Or is it because you scurrilously attempted to make off with my possession, the shadow that you naively believed was entrusted to you on your honour? I for my part do not hate you for this; I find it perfectly natural that you should attempt to play all your cards, including deception and force; the fact that you nevertheless flatter yourself with having the strictest principles and believe yourself to be the epitome of honesty itself is a fancy to which I likewise have no objection. My morals may not be as strict as yours, but my actions match your principles to a T. Or did I ever press a thumb against your throat to take by force your worthy soul, for which I happen to have a hankering? Did I ever set a servant on you to reclaim the purse I traded in fair exchange? Did I ever try to bolt with it?' I could offer no denial; he continued, 'Very well, my good man, very well! So you can't abide my company; this too I understand, and do not hold it against you. We must go our separate ways, that much is clear, and you too are beginning to try my patience. So as to be rid once and for all of my shameful presence, let me recommend again: buy the thing back from me!'

I held forth the purse. 'Take this in exchange.'

'No!'

I heaved a heavy sigh and spoke up again. 'So be it. I demand it, sir: let us part immediately, cross my path no longer in this world, which I trust is big enough for the two of us.'

He smiled and replied, 'I'll be gone, sir, but let me first instruct you how you may ring for me if ever you should desire the aid of your most humble servant. You have only to shake your purse so that the limitless store of gold coins rattles within; that sweet sound will immediately call me forth. Everyone thinks only of his own advantage in this world, but you see that I am also concerned with yours, for I am revealing to you a new strength at your disposal. Oh, that magic purse! For even had the moths already chewed up your shadow, this purse would still remain a strong bond between us. Enough, you're bound to me by the tinkle of my gold; your most humble servant will do your bidding from afar. You well know how useful I can be to my friends, and that the rich are particularly close to me; you have seen it yourself. But one thing, my good sir – this you must remember – you'll never get

your shadow back except under one condition.'

Faces from the past were suddenly recalled by my mind's eye. I asked him quickly, 'Did you ever get a signature from Mr John?'

He smiled. 'Formalities were hardly needed with such a good friend.'

'Where is he? By God, I want to know!' With some hesitation, he put a hand in his pocket, and, plucked up by his hair, there dangled the pale, distorted figure of Thomas John, whose corpse-blue lips opened and closed, pronouncing the solemn words: 'Justo judicio Dei judicatus sum; justo judicio Dei condemnatus sum.'

Horrified, I heaved the rattling purse into the bottomless abyss and spoke these last words to him: 'Accursed be you, Lucifer, in the name of God! Get thee hence and let me never more lay eyes on you!' Darkly scowling, he arose and immediately disappeared behind the wall of stone that bordered this overgrown spot.

IX

I sat there without shadow or money, but a heavy weight had been lifted from my heart; I felt giddy. Had I not also lost my love, or were I to have felt myself blameless for that loss, I believe I could have been happy – but I had no idea what to do next. I searched my pockets and found a few remaining gold pieces; I counted them, and laughed. I had left my horse back at the inn. I was ashamed to return there, at least until the sun had set; it still hung high overhead. I lay down in the shadow of the nearest grove and fell fast asleep.

A swirl of enticing images coalesced into a sweet dream. Mina, wearing a wreath of flowers in her hair, brushed past me and flashed me a friendly smile. Even old faithful Bendel, bedecked with flowers, rushed by with a kind word of greeting. Many a familiar face did I see, including yours, dear Chamisso, if I'm not mistaken, among the gathering throng; a bright light shone, but no one cast a shadow, and, what was stranger still, the spectacle was pleasing to the eye. Flowers and songs, love and happiness thrived in a palm grove; I could neither grasp nor make out clearly those light and lovable figures blowing past me like leaves, but I know that I was happy to be dreaming such a dream and I dreaded waking. And then, when I really was awake, I still kept my eyes closed to prevent the fleeting images from vanishing in the garden of my soul.

Finally I opened my eyes. The sun still hung in the sky, but in the east; I had slept through the night. I took it as a sign that I ought not return to the inn. It was easy to part with the last of my possessions, and I resolved to set out on foot along a back road that led through a wooded valley surrounding the mountain to fulfil whatever destiny held in store for me. I did not look back, and did not even think of turning to Bendel – whom I'd left a rich man – as well I might have. I looked myself over, this new persona that I was to assume in the world: my clothes were rather shabby. I had on an old black *kurtka*, which I had already worn in Berlin and which for some reason I had dug out again at the start of this trip. In addition, I wore a traveller's cap on my head and a pair of old boots on my weary feet. I stood up, I looked around, found and cut myself a walking stick as a kind of souvenir, and immediately continued on my journey.

In the forest I met an old peasant who offered me a friendly greeting and with whom I entered into conversation. Like a curious traveller, I enquired first about the state of the road, and then the region and its inhabitants, what minerals the mountain yielded, and the like. The man proved knowledgeable and well spoken in his replies to my questions. We came to the bed of a mountain stream that had eroded a wide and winding gap through the forest. Shuddering inwardly at the prospect of crossing that sunny space, I let my companion go on ahead. But in the midst of that perilous terrain, he turned around to tell me the history of the erosion. It wasn't long before he noticed what I had missing, and he paused mid-sentence: 'But how can it be? The gentleman has no shadow!'

'Alas! Alas!' I replied with expressive sighs. 'It was a long and terrible illness that robbed me of my hair, fingernails and shadow. See, little father, at my young age, the hair that grew back is completely white, the nails very short and the shadow hasn't grown back yet.'

'Oh no! Oh no!' the old man muttered, shaking his head. 'It's an awful thing to be without a shadow, that must have been a devilish illness the gentleman had!' He did not, however, resume his account of the erosion, and at the next fork in the road he ran off and left me without a word of farewell. Once again a flood of bitter tears cascaded down my cheeks, and my new-found happiness was dashed to pieces.

With a sad heart, I continued on my way and sought no further human contact. I stuck to the darkest woods, and sometimes had to wait hours before crossing a strip of land on which the sun shone so that no human eye might bar my passage. Evenings I sought refuge in the scattered villages. My actual destination was a mine in the mountain in which I planned to seek work underground; for, notwithstanding that my present condition compelled me to fend for myself, I realized full well that only strenuous physical labour could protect me from my own dark thoughts.

A few rainy days enabled me to make good headway, but at the cost of my boots, the soles of which were designed for Count Peter and not for an itinerant wanderer. They were already worn clear through to my bare feet. I absolutely needed a new pair of boots. The next morning I set about this business with zeal, scouting the stalls of a country fair until I found one that sold boots new and used. I picked and haggled for the longest time. I was obliged to renounce a brand-new pair that caught my eye and that I would very much have liked to acquire, but the price was well beyond my means. I made do instead with a pair of second-hand boots that still seemed strong and solid, and that the genial blond lad who ran the stall handed over with a smile in exchange for cash, wishing me well on my way. I put them on immediately and headed north.

I was very much lost in thought, and hardly noticed where I set my feet; my mind was on the mine, which I still hoped to reach that evening, but at which I did not rightly know how I was going to present myself. I had scarcely walked two hundred paces when I noticed that I had wandered off the beaten track; I looked around in search of the trail and realized that I stood in the midst of a vast and ancient forest of virgin evergreens never grazed, so it seemed, by the blade of an axe. Proceeding another few paces, I found myself surrounded by barren cliffs on which only moss

and saxifrage grew, and the gaps in between were covered with fields of snow and ice. The air was exceedingly cold; I looked around and noticed that the forest had disappeared behind me. Another few paces – around me loomed a deathlike silence; the sheet of ice on which I stood, and over which a thick fog hung, seemed to stretch for miles around me; the sun dangled bloody on the edge of the horizon. The cold was unbearable. I had no idea how I had got here; the numbing frost compelled me to hasten my steps; the only sound I heard was the rush of distant waters. Another step, and I landed at the icy edge of an ocean. Countless herds of seals leapt noisily before me in the tide. I followed the shoreline and saw once again in the distance naked cliffs, dry land, birch and evergreen forests, then I ran on for a few minutes dead ahead. It was suffocatingly hot; I looked around. To one side stretched cultivated rice fields and to the other mulberry trees. I sat down in the shadow of the latter and peered at my watch; not a quarter of an hour had passed since I'd left the market place.

I thought I must be dreaming, and bit my tongue to wake myself, but I actually was awake. I closed my eyes in order to collect my thoughts. Then I heard curious nasal syllables being uttered nearby and looked up; two Chinamen, unmistakable in their Asiatic features (even if I were to doubt the authenticity of their costume), addressed me in what I imagine must have been the common local greeting. I got up and stepped back two paces. The Chinamen were gone, the landscape was altogether different: trees and forests stretched before me instead of rice fields. I studied the trees and other flora that blossomed around me; those I recognized were of a Southeast Asian species. Intending to approach one tree for a closer look, I took a step forward – and once again, everything had changed. So I continued walking like a recruit in training, proceeding slowly but with a dogged determination. Wondrously changing vistas, flora, fields, mountains, tundra and sandy deserts unfurled themselves before my marvelling gaze. There was no doubt about it: I had seven-league boots on my feet.

X

I fell to my knees in silent devotion and wept tears of thanks – for all at once my future revealed itself to me. Cast out from human society because of my early trespasses, I had been sent back to nature, the realm I have always cherished; the earth had been given me as a fertile garden to tend, the study of which was henceforth to be the direction and motivating force of my life, a life wholly devoted to science. This was not so much a resolve as a vision. For ever since that moment I have sought faithfully, with a quiet, firm, unceasing zeal to realize and render the original image that came to my inner eye complete in a bright and crystal-clear flash; and henceforth my sense of self-worth will for ever depend ineluctably on my ability to make the rendering true to the original vision.

I pulled myself together, and without a moment's hesitation took a quick look around, laying instant claim to the field I would henceforth be harvesting. I stood on the mountain top of Tibet, and the sun that had just risen before my eyes a few hours ago was already sinking into the firmament of the night sky; I strode through

Asia from east to west, keeping a step ahead of the sun in its rapid descent, and crossed over into Africa. I looked around eagerly, scanning the entire continent in all directions. As I gaped at the old pyramids and temples of Egypt, I happened to spy in the desert, not far from Thebes with its hundred gates, those caves inhabited in former times by Christian anchorites. All at once I knew that this was to be my home. I selected as my future domicile one of the most remote, albeit spacious and comfortable, caves, a lair inaccessible to jackals, and then I continued on my way. At the Pillars of Hercules I crossed over into Europe, and, after inspecting its southern- and northernmost provinces, I stepped from northern Asia via the North Pole from Greenland into America, wandered through both the northern and southern half of that continent, encountered the onset of winter in the south, turned in my tracks and headed back northward across Cape Horn.

I lingered until day broke in the Far East, and only after a good long rest did I resume my wanderings. I followed the mountain chain with the highest known elevations on earth through both Americas. Slowly and carefully I stepped from peak to peak, sometimes over flaming volcanoes, sometimes over snow-covered domes, often pausing to catch my breath; at last I reached Mount Elias and I leapt across the Bering Strait back into Asia. I followed the west coast of that continent along its many twists and turns and took pains to explore those islands accessible to me. From the Malacca Peninsula my boots carried me across to Sumatra, Java, Bali and Lombok; I attempted repeatedly, at considerable risk, though always unsuccessfully, to ford across to the smaller islands and promontories that speckle the sea in those parts, and thereby to facilitate a north-west passage to Borneo and the other outlying islands of the archipelago. I was obliged to abandon the effort. At the tip of Lombok I finally sat down with my face turned to the south and to the east and I wept, rattling, as it were, the gates of my far-flung prison, for here at last I was forced to acknowledge my limitations. New Holland, that remarkable place, and the South Sea Islands, whose sunbathed cloak of flora and fauna are so essential to a complete picture of the earth's life forms, would be for ever off-limits to me; and thus, in essence, all that I could possibly collect and comment upon was doomed to remain a mere fragment of the whole. Oh, dear Adelbert, what are man's efforts on this earth but vain illusions?

Often in the dead of winter of the Southern Hemisphere I have tried to push westward across the South Pole and tackle those two hundred paces separating Cape Horn from Van Diemen's Land and New Holland, with no care for how I might return, daring the ice cap to close in upon me like a coffin lid, stepping with wild abandon from iceberg to iceberg, oblivious to the gaping jaws of the frozen deep. And all for naught; New Holland still eludes me. Each time I returned to Lombok and sat down on its tip, and wept again with my face turned to the south and to the east, rattling the gates of my prison.

I finally lifted myself up by my bootstraps, as it were, and strode with a heavy heart back into the interior of Asia. I traversed it then, ever following the dawn breaking in the west, and that same night arrived in Thebes at the entrance to the cave I'd selected just the afternoon of the day before.

As soon as I was somewhat rested and day broke over Europe, I made it my first order of business to go about acquiring the necessities of life. First, I needed a pair of brake-shoes; for I had learnt just how uncomfortable it could be to have no means of curtailing my step (other than to remove my boots) if, say, I wanted to take a closer look at some nearby object. A pair of bedroom slippers pulled on over the boots fitted the bill, just as I hoped they would, and later I took to carrying two pairs with me, for I was often obliged to kick off the ones I had on without time enough to retrieve them whenever, in the course of my botanical exploits, lions, humans or hyenas took me by surprise. My fine timepiece served me well as an excellent chronometer on these short jaunts. In addition, I needed a sextant, a few geometric instruments and books.

In order to procure the latter, I paid several uneasy visits to Paris and London, where I was shrouded by a fortuitous fog. Once the meagre remains of my magical money had been spent, I offered payment in the form of easy-to-find specimens of African ivory, whereby I was naturally obliged to pick out the smaller portable teeth. Soon I had furnished and equipped myself with all that I needed, and I immediately commenced my new life as an independent naturalist.

I criss-crossed the globe, now gauging its altitudes, now measuring the temperature of its springs and of the air above, now observing fauna, now examining flora; I rushed from the Equator to the North Pole, from one region to another, comparing my impressions and experiences. The eggs of the African ostrich or the northern seabird as well as fruits, particularly those of the tropical palm tree and bananas, served as my common fare. As a surrogate for happiness I had nicotine, and in place of human compassion and companionship I had the love of a faithful poodle who watched over my cave in the Theban Hills, and, when I returned home laden with new treasures, leapt at me for joy and consoled me with the human sense that I was not alone on this earth. But one more adventure was still to bring me back among humankind.

XI

Once, when I lingered on shore of the frozen north, having braked my boots to collect lichen and algae, a polar bear suddenly stepped out from behind a boulder and caught me unawares. I intended, after tossing away my slippers, to step over to a nearby island to which a naked rock jutting up out of the ocean offered access. With one foot I landed firmly on the rock, and went tumbling on its far side into the sea, for unbeknownst to me the slipper had remained attached to my other boot.

The icy chill engulfed me and, struggling to stay afloat, I barely managed to save my life; as soon as I reached dry land, I ran as quickly as I could towards the Libyan desert to dry off in the sun. But, once exposed to the full force of its powerful rays, I was burnt so badly on top of my head that I hurried back northward in an acutely feverish state. I sought by means of vigorous exercise to improve my condition, and ran with a quick and shaky step from west to east and back again from east to west. Thus I stumbled from broad daylight into darkest night, from summer swelter into the icy dead of winter.

I have no idea how long I kept scurrying about in this fashion across the surface of the globe. A burning fever ran like lava in my veins; terrified, I felt myself fast losing consciousness. To add to my troubles, in the course of such careless globe-trotting I happened to stamp on someone's foot. I must have hurt him badly, for I received a mighty shove and I collapsed in a swoon.

When I came to again, I found myself comfortably ensconced in a fine bed that stood among other beds in a spacious and stately hall. Someone was seated at my feet; people wandered through the hall from one bed to the next. They came to my bed and discussed my case. They referred to me, however, as Number 12, even though I discovered on the wall at my feet a black marble tablet on which, clearly inscribed in gold letters – it was no illusion, I could read it clearly – there was my name

spelt correctly. On the tablet beneath my name there were another two rows of letters, but I was far too weak to make any sense of them, and I shut my eyes again. I heard a voice reading aloud from a document concerning said Peter Schlemiel, but was unable to follow the words; I noticed a kindly-looking gentleman and a very beautiful lady in black approach my bed. The faces were not altogether strange to me, and yet I could not place them.

In a little while I regained consciousness. I was identified as Number 12, and because of his long beard, Number 12 was taken for a Jew, though he was not treated any the worse for it. The fact that he had no shadow appeared to have gone unnoticed. My boots, I was assured, along with everything else found on my person when they brought me here, were kept under lock and key and would be returned to me as soon as I was well enough to leave. The place where I lay sick was called the SCHLEMILIUM; the text concerning Peter Schlemiel read aloud daily was an exhortation to pray for his welfare as the founder and benefactor of this charitable institution. The kindly gentleman was none other than Bendel, the lovely lady was Mina.

I lay there convalescing incognito, and learnt more interesting facts: the locale was Bendel's native town; here, with what was left of my accursed gold, he had founded and taken over the direction of this hospital in my memory, where poor unfortunates hallowed my name. Mina was a widow; criminal proceedings had cost Mr Rascal his life, and her the remains of her fortune. Her parents were deceased. She lived here as a God-fearing widow practising daily acts of charity.

On one occasion I happened to overhear the following conversation between her and Mr Bendel at the bedside of Number 12: 'But why, kind lady, must you continuously expose yourself to the evil humours of this place? Has fate been so hard on you that you wish to die?'

'Not at all, Mr Bendel, ever since I dreamt that long-drawn-out dream of mine to the end and reawakened to myself, I've been quite well; since then I no longer wish for and no longer fear death. I now think pleasantly of the past and the future. Is it not also with the same quiet inner contentment that you now serve your old master

and friend in such a blessed manner?'

'Yes, indeed, thank God, kind lady. We've been through strange and wondrous things; unwittingly we sipped our fill of joy and bitter woe from the cup of life. And now that it's empty, one might well be tempted to believe that all that was only a test, and that, fortified with the wisdom of experience, we stand before the real beginning. This is the real beginning, and though we do not wish the return of past delusions, we are nevertheless happy to have lived it as it was. And at this moment I also feel confident that, wherever he is, our old friend must be doing better than before.'

'I feel it too,' replied the lovely widow, and they walked on past my bed.

This conversation made a profound impression on me; yet I fell into a deep quandary over whether to reveal my true identity or depart unrecognized. Finally I made my decision. Requesting pencil and paper, I jotted down the following words: 'Your old friend is indeed doing better than before, and if his life now be taken up with works of atonement, it is the atonement of a man reconciled with life.'

Hereupon, having regained my strength and feeling much better, I asked to be allowed to get dressed. They fetched the key to the little cabinet beside my bed. In it I found all my possessions. I put on my clothes, and over my old black *kurtka* I slung the botanical pouch (in which, to my great jubilation, I found again all the flora I had gathered in the Northern Hemisphere), slipped into my boots, laid the note I'd written on my bed and, as soon as the door was open, was already well on my way to Thebes.

Once I set foot again on the coast of Syria and returned along the same path that had last led me from home, I spotted my poor Figaro come bounding at me. That formidable dog appears to have attempted to follow the trail of his master, who left him languishing at home for such a long while. I stood still and called to him. He leapt upon me, barking with a thousand stirring exclamations of his innocent, unfettered joy. I took him in my arms, for the poor beast was naturally unable to keep up with my boots, and brought him back home with me.

There I found everything as I had left it, and little by little, as my strength returned, I went back to my former pursuits and resumed my old life; except that for an entire year I avoided exposing myself to the bitter effects of the polar chill.

And this, my dear Chamisso, is how I still live today. My boots do not wear thin at the soles, as that very learned work by the famous Tieckius, *De rebus gestis Pollicilli*, once gave me to fear they would. The durability of my fine footwear remains unimpeded; only my own strength is fading; and yet I may console myself with the fact that I have not used them idly but have employed them consistently for the pursuit of knowledge and progress. I have, in so far as my boots permitted, gained a deeper knowledge and learnt more than any man before me of the earth, its formation, its precipices, its atmospheres in their constant flux, the manifestations of its magnetic force and its life forms, particularly the flora. I have recorded the conditions I observed as accurately as I could in as clear a fashion as possible in many works, and noted down my conclusions and views in a few cursory papers.

I charted the geography of the interior of Africa and that of the frozen polar ice caps, mapped out Asia from its centre to its eastern coastline. My *Historia stirpium plantarum utriusque orbis* is a major, albeit fragmentary, contribution to the *Flora universalis terrae* and an important link in my *Systema naturae*. In my painstaking work, I believe that I have not only increased by a third the number of known species, but have added my share to our knowledge of the natural order and the geography of plants. I am working studiously on my fauna. I will take pains to see that before my death my manuscripts are deposited in the library of the University of Berlin. And you, my dear Chamisso, I have chosen as the executor of my wondrous story, so that once I no longer walk the earth my story may yet serve as a moral lesson to some of its citizens. But to you, my dear friend, I say that if you wish to live among your fellow man, learn to value your shadow more than gold. If, on the other hand, you choose to live only for the sake of your own better self, then you need no advice from me.

EXPLICIT

The Marble Statue

1819

Josef von Eichendorff

It was on a lovely summer evening that Florio, a young nobleman, slowly approached the gates of Lucca, delighting in the pleasant breeze that swept over the splendid landscape and the towers and rooftops of the city, and rustled the gay garments of the elegant ladies and gentlemen strolling along, engaged in cheerful chatter beneath the tall chestnut alleys on both sides of the street.

Then another brightly attired rider on a gallant mount, heading in the same direction, with a golden chain around his neck and a velvet feathered bonnet gracing his dark brown locks, came riding up beside him with a friendly greeting. Trotting along, side by side, in the darkening eventide, the two soon struck up a conversation, and Florio was so taken by the stranger's slender figure, his bold and cheerful manner and the sound of his merry voice, that he could not look away.

'What business brings you to Lucca?' the stranger finally asked.

'No business at all,' Florio replied, a bit timidly.

'No business? Then you must surely be a poet!' the latter replied with a hearty laugh.

'Most definitely not!' Florio responded, turning red in the face. 'I did indeed try my hand at the merry minstrel's art, but when I turned back to the grand old masters, and saw how all that I could only dream of and suggest was there in body and soul, then my own voice sounded like the feeble little chirp of a lark wafted by the wind in the measureless expanse of heaven's dome.'

'Everyone sings God's praises in his own way,' the stranger said, 'and the mingling of all voices makes the spring.' As he spoke, the stranger's big soulful eyes fell with evident fondness on the comely young man who took in the world at twilight with such an innocent mien.

'All I want right now is to travel,' the latter continued in a bolder, more confident tone of voice, 'and I feel as though released from a prison, free to indulge all my old wishes and whims. Having grown up in the silence of the country, for years I gazed with longing at those distant blue mountains when spring came sweeping through our garden like an enchanted minstrel, inveigling me with hymns of the lovely distance and hinting at the great untold pleasures that await me.'

These last words set the stranger thinking: 'Have you then never,' he asked in an amused, albeit serious, tone of voice, 'heard of the magical flutist who lures the youth into an enchanted mountain from which none return? Better be careful, my boy!'

Florio did not know what to make of the stranger's words, nor did he get the chance to ask him to explain; since, instead of riding up to the gate, unwittingly following the strolling crowd, they found themselves in a wide green place planted with colourful tents, where a merry company of musicians mingled with people on horseback and on foot in the last glimmering light of evening.

'Here's a good place to turn in for the night,' the stranger said merrily, swinging out of his saddle; 'see you again soon, I hope!' whereupon he promptly disappeared in the crowd.

Florio gazed a while in quiet ecstasy at the unexpected sight. Then he followed the example of his erstwhile companion, passed the reins of his horse to his servant and mingled with the merry throng.

Hidden choirs burst into song all around him from behind blossoming bushes, beneath the tall trees stately ladies strolled up and down and let their lovely downcast eyes survey the glittering lawn, laughing and chattering, nodding with brightly coloured feathers in the evening glimmer like a bed of flowers wafting in the wind. On a green field not far away a group of girls amused themselves playing badminton. The brightly feathered shuttlecocks fluttered like butterflies, tracing arches back and forth in the blue air, while the girls scampering up and down the green expanse never lost their sweet expressions. One girl, in particular, attracted Florio's attention with her comely, still almost childlike, figure and the grace of all her movements. She wore a full and brilliant wreath of flowers in her hair and looked like the picture of spring itself, now flying with a burst of energy across the field, now bending, now leaping again with her lovely limbs. A blunder by her opponents made her shuttlecock take a wrong turn and land at Florio's feet. He picked it up and handed it to the wreathed maiden, who came running after it. She froze, as though struck dumb, and gazed at him in silence with her big, beautiful eyes. Then, blushing, she bowed and bounded back to her playmates.

The ever-swelling stream of glittering carriages and riders slowly and splendidly wending their way along the main alley, meanwhile, drew Florio's attention away from this charming game, and he rambled alone for a good hour amongst the ever-changing spectacle.

All of a sudden he heard a number of women and the gentlemen beside them cry out: 'It's the singer Fortunato!' He spun around to look in the direction in which they pointed and, to his great amazement, spotted the handsome stranger who had accompanied him to this place earlier on. Off to the side in a meadow, the stranger stood leaning against a tree in the midst of an elegant circle of ladies and gentlemen, all listening to his singing, to which several voices from the crowd sometimes sang back sweetly. Among them Florio once again spotted the beautiful badminton player who, quietly contented, seemed to soak up every note with her wide-open eyes.

Struck dumb, Florio bethought how before he had been engaged in such friendly chatter with the famous singer, whom he had so long admired by reputation, and now stood timidly at a considerable distance, taking in the sweet strains of the song contest. Heartened by the notes that wafted his way, he would have gladly stood

there listening all night long, and was downright angry when Fortunato soon stopped singing and the flock of listeners rose from the lawn.

Then the singer spotted the young man in the distance and promptly walked up to him. Warmly he clasped him by both hands and, ignoring all protests, pulled the young fool along, like a friendly prisoner, to the nearby open tent where the group now gathered for a merry dinner party. Everyone greeted him like an old acquaintance, many a lovely eye rested with well-disposed wonder on the pink-cheeked young stripling.

After several cheerful chats, everyone gathered round the table standing in the middle of the tent. Refreshing fruits and wine in cut-glass goblets sparkled on the blinding white surface of the tablecloth; big bushels of flowers in silver vases, amongst which pretty girls' faces peered forth, emitted a beguiling scent; while outside, the last flicker of twilight shone golden on the lawn and the mirror-smooth stream that flowed by. Florio had almost inadvertently attached himself to the lovely badminton player. She recognized him again and sat in timid silence, but her long, nervous lashes made a bad job of hiding the glow of her dark looks.

It was decided in the circle that everyone would sing the praises of his beloved in a little improvised ditty. The light strains of music that wafted through the tent like a spring breeze, only grazing the surface of life without plumbing its depths, moved the revellers to many a merry image round the table. Florio was beside himself with joy, his heart aflutter with pleasant thoughts, all foolish fear drained from his soul, and peered out through the lights and flowers at the lovely landscape fading in the last glimmer of twilight. And when his turn came to sing a toast, he raised his goblet in the air and sang:

> Every young swain his sweetheart gladly names,
> But I alone am left out of the game,
> For lest my beloved feel the same,
> It would not do by a stranger to be named.
> So must I let this wave of passion pass me by,
> And on spring's beachhead dry out and die.

At these words his lovely dining companion flashed him a gambolling grin and dropped her gaze again as soon as their eyes met. But his song had been so heartfelt and the look on his handsome face so intense that she put up no resistance when he pressed his hot lips to hers. 'Bravo, bravo!' cried many a merry gent, whereupon a gay, but guileless, laughter erupted round the table. Flustered and confused, Florio dropped his glass; and, blushing crimson, the lovely object of his kiss peered down at her lap, her face looking indescribably beautiful among the flowers.

So every gay blade merrily selected his beloved. Only Fortunato seemed to belong to no one or to all and looked almost lonesome in this comely chaos. He was boisterously merry and some might have called him downright cocky, completely letting loose, as he did, with wildly alternating bursts of jesting, seriousness and tomfoolery, had the look in his crystal-clear eyes not suddenly turned almost alarmingly thoughtful. Florio had firmly resolved to tell him outright at table of the affection and respect he had long harboured for him. But he couldn't manage it today; all of his quiet attempts slid off the singer's unyielding merriment as off a

duck's back. He simply could not fathom him.

Outside, meanwhile, everything had grown silent and solemn, lone stars appeared between the darkening crests of the trees, the river purled more noisily through the cooling dark. Then at last came Fortunato's turn to hold forth. He jumped up, reached for his guitar and sang:

How sweet the sound
That through my bosom wafts!
To the clouds and beyond,
Will it lift me aloft?

High as a mountain my spirit soars
Watching life unfurl,
With all my heart I do adore
All that's lovely in this world.

Yes, Bacchus, I know,
How godly you seem!
I understand your glow,
The lightness of your dreams.

A wreath of roses in your hair,
The picture of eternal youth,
The soothing twinkle of your stare,
Eyes flickering with sweet truth.

Is it love or devotion
That fills your heart with glee?
Whatever the emotion,
Spring laughs and you agree.

Dame Venus, glad goddess,
So frivolous and fair,
Rosy dawn is your bodice,
The world is your boudoir.

On yon sunny height,
Your courtiers at hand,
Winged cherubs alight
At your command.

Like heralds they clamour
And gaily invite
In gilded dreams of amour
To visit the queen of delight.

The ladies turn their heads,
The knights fall to their knees,
And make of the field a flower bed,
The fair blossoms all buzzing with bees.

And every youth with soft caress
Woos the beauty on his arm,
And so like some *Liebesfest*
The merry company moves on.

Here he suddenly shifted manner and tone and continued:

The music faints,
The ladies look perplexed,
Nature's drawn with paler paint,

The gentlemen grow vexed.

With a heavenly clamour
Serenity is wrenched,
Gone the flush of amour,
The gardens and fields are drenched.

And there amidst the bacchanal
I glimpse a lad so pale!
Silent as a funeral pall,
From whence, I wonder, did he hail?

With blossoming poppies
His head is bound,
And braided with lilies
He wears like a crown.

Like a kiss he brings
From the blue beyond
A wink from the winged
And a wave of the wand.

Holding a flame
Flickering bright,
'Who, say your name,
With me will alight?'

And sometimes in play
He turns the torch around,
And the whole world fades
Without a blessed sound.

No sooner do the blossoms sink,
The earth become a withered thing,
Than the night sky begins to blink
With its nocturnal flowering.

Oh heaven-sent boy,
A blessing for the eye!
I'll leave behind the hoi polloi
And follow you on high.

Why linger here when heaven calls?
Aloft, aloft, I'll go!
The gates are opening to that great hall
Oh Father, don't leave me below!

Fortunato went silent and so did everyone else, as the merry din died down outside and, little by little, the music faded, the crowd dispersed and all the magic of the moment gave way to the immeasurable majesty of the starry sky and the mighty murmur of the river and the woods. Then a tall, slender knight, whose lavish attire cast a greenish-golden shimmer on the forest's flickering light, stepped into the tent. A wild, fiery look shot out of the deep hollows of his eyes, his face was handsome, but pale and expressionless. His sudden appearance made everyone think immediately with an involuntary shudder of the silent guest in Fortunato's song. But, following a fleeting bow, he hastened to the host's buffet and, practically panting with thirst, his pale lips trembling, in deep draughts gulped down a goblet of dark red wine.

Florio gave a sudden start when this curious character turned to him, of all those present, and welcomed him as an old acquaintance. Flabbergasted and racking his brains, Florio studied him from head to foot, as he could not for the life of him remember ever having seen him before. But the knight was uncommonly talkative and spoke a great deal about certain occurrences from Florio's past. He was, moreover, so familiar with the character of Florio's native clime, with the garden and those homely haunts the young man still cherished from his childhood, that Florio soon came to terms with this dark soul.

But for the others, Donati – that was the knight's name – did not seem to fit in. A strangely unsettling disturbance, the source of which no one could identify, seeped into the atmosphere. And since, in the meantime, night had finally fallen, the party soon broke up.

Then a wondrous play of shadows erupted outside, of carriages, horses, servants and high-hanging lanterns casting strange glimmers on the nearby water's surface, between the trees and the tangle of fleeing figures. In this wild illumination Donati looked much more pale and ghostlike than before. The beautiful young girl with the wreath of flowers in her hair kept casting fearful, sidelong looks at him. And when he drew near and with chivalrous gallantry helped her out of the tent, she meekly recoiled, pressing back against Florio, who had stayed behind, and with a fast-beating heart lifted the lovely girl into her saddle. Now that everyone was ready to ride off, she flashed him another friendly look from her elegant perch, and soon the entire glittering gathering was gobbled up by the night.

Florio felt strange suddenly finding himself alone on that wide empty meadow with Donati and the singer. With his guitar under his arm, the latter walked back and forth before the tent at the water's edge, and seemed to grow once again reflective, while he plucked a few notes that hung in the air, lulling the silent meadow to sleep. Then all of a sudden he stopped. A curious malaise seemed to spread over his otherwise open, friendly expression, and he impatiently made ready to leave.

Whereupon all three mounted their horses and rode together to the nearby city. Fortunato did not say a word along the way, while Donati gushed forth in a flood of all the more friendly, well-spoken and eloquent words; Florio rode silently like a dreaming girl between them, still taken by the lingering effects of love.

When they came to the city gate, Donati's horse, which had already shied away from several passers-by, suddenly reared almost upright and refused to enter. A sputtering flash of anger almost twisted the rider's expression, and a wild, half-muttered curse passed from his fluttering lips, which made Florio start with surprise, for such ways did not accord in the least with the knight's otherwise refined and sober respectability. But the knight soon composed himself again. 'I wanted to accompany you to the inn,' he said, turning to Florio with a smile and with his customary grace, 'but my horse won't have it, as you can see. I live in a villa just outside town, and hope to see you there very soon.' Whereupon he bowed in the saddle, and the horse, hardly still manageable, consumed by an incomprehensible haste and fear, took off like lightning, dashing into the darkness, the wind whizzing behind it.

‘Thank God,’ cried Fortunato, ‘that the night gobbled him up again! He really did appear to me like one of those dun-coloured, misshapen night butterflies escaped from a frightful nightmare that swarm at dawn and with their long whiskers and ghastly big eyes look as if they had a face.’ Florio, who had already developed a feeling of friendship for Donati, expressed his surprise at such a harsh judgement. But, irritated all the more by this astounding gentleness, the singer kept on with his merry harangue, calling the knight, to Florio’s chagrin, a lunatic, a lovesick swain, a melancholy braggart.

Engaged in such chatter, they finally reached their lodgings and each one soon went off to his rooms.

Florio flung himself, fully dressed, in bed, but he could not fall asleep. His soul was still stirred up, still pulsing and resounding and humming with all the impressions of the day. Soon the sound of opening and closing doors subsided and only an occasional voice could still be heard, until finally, house, city and field sank into deep silence; then it seemed to him as if he were coasting with swan-white sails over a moonlit sea. The gentle ripples struck the side of his craft, sirens reared out of the deep, all of them resembling the lovely girl with the wreath of flowers. She sang such a wondrous, sad and never-ending song that he felt he was about to drown in wistfulness. The boat tipped further and further to the side, and slowly, unnoticeably, sank deeper and deeper. Then he awakened with a start.

He leapt out of bed and opened the window. The inn was located on the outskirts of the town, and his gaze took in a wide, silent swath of hills, gardens and valleys all bathed in moonlight. Outside too, everywhere he turned, the sway of the trees and the rush of the streams still seemed to preserve lingering and echoing traces of last night’s atmosphere, as though the entire region sang out softly, like the sirens he’d heard in his slumber. He could not withstand the temptation. He grabbed the guitar that Fortunato had left behind, walked out of his room and stepped quietly through the silent house. The downstairs door was just leant shut; a servant lay asleep on the doorstep. So he managed to slip out, unnoticed, and ambled cheerfully through wine gardens, down empty alleys and past cottages, whose inhabitants were all fast asleep, ever further out into the country.

Looking out between the neighbouring tracts of land, he saw the river running through the valley; many glimmering white castles clustered here and there sat like sleeping swans in the sea of silence. Then he sang with a merry voice:

Come let us take a night-time stroll,
A trusty zither in hand!
And strumming, first the hills extol,
Then hail the heavens and the silent land.

The night world is a different place
From the valley where I whiled away the day in bliss.
And in the woods, the moon now shows its face
Through the treetops, blowing its cool kisses.

The vineyard’s deserted, the vintner gone.
The river’s ripple is all we hear,
And all the lusty goings-on
Forgotten, but for a silver tear.

And nightingales that nest in dreams
Awaken, trilling, in the breeze.
A whispering, or so it seems,
Stirs memory in the towering trees.

But joy can't just evaporate.
And of the day's delirious fest
All memory did not abate,
There's still a secret singing in my breast.

And gladly do I strum these strings
For you, dear girl, across the stream,
The distant ear for whom I sing,
Who knows the dreamer and his dream.

He had to laugh at himself, since by the end of his song he had no idea whom he was serenading. It wasn't the charming girl with the wreath of flowers in her hair. The music outside the tents, the dream in his room, and his heart still infused with the charmed notes – the dream and the girl's graceful features had imperceptibly and wondrously metamorphosed her image into something far more beautiful, bigger and more resplendent, the like of which he'd never seen before.

Lost in thought, he wandered on until he came unexpectedly on a large fish pond ringed by tall trees. The moon that just rose over the tops of the trees shed a sharp light on a marble statue of Venus set there on a stone pedestal at the shore, as though the goddess had just stepped out of the waves, and gazed back in enchantment at the reflection of her own loveliness that the drunken glimmer of the water's surface flashed back amidst the silently blossoming light of the stars rising from the deep. Several swans quietly traced their monotonous circles round the divine image, and a soft rustling emanated from the trees round about.

Florio stood stock still, as if riveted by his gaze, for the sight of the statue appeared to him like a sudden encounter with the beloved he'd long pined after, like a magical flower sprung from the twilight of his childhood and the dreamy silence of the first days of his youth. The longer he looked the more it seemed to him as if the statue had just then slowly shut its soulful eyes, as if her lips wished to part in a greeting, as though life wafted forth like a sweet warming song from her lovely limbs. He held his eyes shut for a long time, blinded by longing and rapture.

When he looked up again everything all at once seemed different. The moon hung strangely from behind a cluster of clouds, a brisk wind whipped up dark waves in the pond, and the sculpture of Venus, now so terribly white and motionless, peered at him almost fearfully from the stone hollows of its eyes out of the boundless silence. The young man was overcome by a sense of horror he had never felt before. He rushed off and, walking as fast as he could, without stopping to catch his breath, hastened through gardens and vineyards back towards the silent city; for even the rustle of the trees now sounded to him like a clearly audible whisper, and the tall poplars seemed to be close on his heels with their far-reaching shadows.

So he returned, visibly shaken, to the inn. The servant still lay asleep on the threshold and jumped up with a start as Florio stepped over him. But Florio slammed the front door shut behind him and only breathed a sigh of relief once he'd

reached his room, where he kept walking back and forth a long while before calming down. Then he flung himself back in bed and finally fell asleep, dreaming the strangest dreams.

The following morning Florio and Fortunato sat at breakfast under the sun-drenched trees in front of the inn. Florio looked paler than usual in the pleasant pall of shade. ‘The morning,’ said Fortunato merrily, ‘is a dashing fellow in the flush of good health, shouting out with joy from the high mountain tops to the sleeping world below, wiping the tears from the flowers and trees, surging, raging and singing. He doesn’t give a hoot for delicate feelings, but gruffly grabs hold of your every limb and laughs in your face if you come out looking pallid, as if you’re still bathed in moonbeams.’ Though he had originally intended to tell the singer about the lovely Venus sculpture, Florio, ashamed of himself, sat there in awkward silence. His night-time stroll had, however, been noticed by the servant, and word of it was probably made public. Laughing, Fortunato continued: ‘Well, if you don’t believe me, just try it for yourself, stand up and say, for instance: oh lovely, precious soul, oh moonlight, you pollen of delicate hearts, etc., and see if that doesn’t make you a laughing stock! And yet I bet you babbled some such stuff more than once last night and no doubt with a straight face.’

Florio, who until now had always imagined Fortunato as kind and gentle-hearted, was sorely taken aback by the beloved singer’s flippant sport at his expense. He responded abruptly, the tears welling up in his pained eyes: ‘Surely your words don’t bespeak what you feel in your heart, and I ask you never to do that again. But I won’t let you rile me, there are some gentle and lofty feelings that may well need to be veiled, but are surely not shameful, and there is a quiet contentment that must seal itself off from the brash daylight, and only opens its holy calyx to the starry firmament like the night-blossoming flower bed of an angel.’

Fortunato gazed at the youth in amazement. ‘Then, by God, you must be head over heels in love!’

Fortunato, who wanted to take a ride, had, in the meantime, ordered his horse to be brought to him. He lovingly stroked the bent neck of his elegantly decked-out steed, which snorted with high-spirited impatience. Then he turned back to Florio and, smiling, reached out his hand. ‘I feel bad for you, my friend,’ he said. ‘There are far too many sensitive, love-struck, good young lads like yourself in this world hell-bent on being miserable. Forget about melancholy, moonbeams and all that poppycock; and if ever you’re feeling really down, then ride out into the wide open fields of God’s good morning and shake it off in heartfelt prayer – things would really have to be pretty bad if that didn’t restore your spirits!’ With these words he swung himself into the saddle and rode past hilltop vineyards and flowery gardens out into the colourful echoing distance, himself as bright and brilliant as the morning that lay before him.

Florio peered after him a long while, till the dust clouds dissolved on the distant sea of the horizon. Then he abruptly turned and paced back and forth beneath the trees. The things he saw last night left a deep, uncertain longing in his soul. On the

other hand, Fortunato's words of admonition had made him strangely moody and confused. Like a sleepwalker roused at the sound of his name, he himself no longer knew what he wanted. Lost in thought, he often paused before the wondrous spectacle of nature, as though he wanted to seek counsel with the merry majesty of it all. But, filtered through the foliage, the flickers of early morning sunlight only occasionally pierced the walls of his feverish breast, which was still in the thrall of another power. For in his heart the stars still cast their magic spell, in the glimmer of which the unspeakably lovely marble sculpture peered back at him again with irresistible force.

So at last he resolved to seek out the pond again, and struck out in the same direction in which he'd wandered the night before.

But how altogether different everything looked there now! Cheerful people made their busy way through the vineyards and gardens and up and down the alleys; children played quietly on the sunny lawns in front of cottages, which same structures, metamorphosed into sleeping sphinxes nestled beneath the dream spectres of the trees, had terrified him the night before; the moon hung pale and distant in the clear sky; and countless birds twittered and flitted about in the woods. It was inconceivable to him how he could possibly have been struck by such a strange terror in this placid place.

Meanwhile, lost in thought, he noticed that he had wandered far afield. He looked carefully all around him, now doubling back, now ambling forward again, but to no avail; the more attentive his gaze, the more unknown and altogether different everything appeared.

He staggered around like this for a long while. Soon the birds went silent, the circle of hills around him grew more and more still. The rays of the midday sun played, opalescent, burning down on the woodlands beyond, which seemed lost in slumber and reverie, as though smothered beneath a veil of stifling heat. Then he found himself, unexpectedly, standing before an iron gate, through the elegantly gilded bars of which he peered into a vast and splendid pleasure garden. A sentient burst of coolness wafted forth, refreshing the weary wanderer. The gate was not locked; he quietly opened it and stepped in.

Towering rows of beech trees received him with their festive shadows, beneath which, every now and then, golden birds fluttered about like falling petals, while big strange flowers, the like of which Florio had never seen, waved their yellow and red bells back and forth in the gentle breeze. Countless fountains splashed, churning up golden bubble after bubble in this vast solitude. Through the trees, in the distance, one could make out a resplendent palace surrounded with shimmering, tall, thin columns. There was not a living soul in sight; everything was silent. Only every now and then a nightingale awakened and sang out, almost as though it were sobbing in its sleep. Florio stared in surprise at trees, fountains and flowers, for it seemed to him as if all this were buried in the tides of time, as if the current of the day passed over him in light, clear waves, and beneath him lay the garden bound and bewitched, dreaming of a life gone by.

He hadn’t gone very far when he thought he heard the strains of a lute, now resounding loudly, now softly fading again, drowned out by the gurgle of the fountains. He stood still and listened, the notes came ever closer and closer, when, suddenly, a tall, slender woman of wondrous beauty stepped out from behind the trees into the silent arbour, slowly ambling along without looking up. In her arms she carried a splendid lute, its belly lavishly decorated in gold leaf, on which, as though lost in thought, she strummed occasional chords. Her golden hair fell in thick curls over the dazzling whiteness of her practically bare shoulders, down her back; the long, wide sleeves of her blouse looked as though they were woven out of a snow of cherry blossoms and were clasped at the wrists by elegant golden bangles; her willowy body was wrapped in a sky-blue dress embroidered at the hemline with brightly coloured flowers wondrously intertwined with one another. Just then a bright burst of sunlight shone through an opening in the arbour illuminating the lovely figure. Florio went weak at the knees – hers were unmistakably the features of the beautiful statue of Venus he’d glimpsed at the pond. But she sang to herself, seemingly oblivious to the stranger:

Why rouse me yet again, you saucy season, spring?
A wondrous stirring grips the fertile land,
Reviving old longings with the wave of a wand,
Quickening my limbs into sweet awakening.

Oh lovely mother saluted by a thousand songs,
Just to see you young again, bedecked with bridal wreath.
The woods are whispering, the rivers purling underneath,
And naiads singing as they scamper along.

Hidden in the cloistered valley like a rose,
Fanned by the flirtatious gust,
Blushing as it stretches in that sultry clime,

So would you wake me from my sweet repose
To laugh alive the season of lust,
And make me swoon for scent and rhyme.

Singing, she sauntered off, now disappearing in the green distance, now reappearing, always further and further off, until finally she vanished altogether in the proximity of the palace. Now everything went silent again, only the trees and fountains rustled and gurgled as before. Florio stood there, lost in dreams; it was as if he had known the lovely lute player for a long, long time, and had only forgotten and lost track of her in the course of life’s many distractions, and as though she were driven by wistfulness to amble among the bubbling fountains, and kept beckoning him to follow. Deeply moved, he hurried on into the garden in the direction in which she disappeared. Under the canopy of ancient trees he came upon a crumbling wall, on which, here and there, the traces of lovely painted murals were still half visible. Beside the wall, between scattered broken slabs of marble and the foundations of fallen columns, amongst which grass and flowers grew wild, a man lay sleeping. Stunned, Florio recognized the knight Donati. But his facial features were strangely distorted in sleep; he looked almost like a dead man. Florio felt a furtive shudder at the sight of him. He gave the sleeping man a shove with

considerable force. Donati slowly opened his eyes, and their initial expression was so strange, fixed and wild that Florio shrank back in terror. Moreover, he muttered a few dark words between sleeping and waking that Florio did not understand. When at last he had completely shaken the sleep from his eyes he leapt up and looked at Florio, so it seemed, with great amazement. ‘Where am I?’ Florio cried out abruptly. ‘What noble lady lives in this lovely garden?’

Whereupon Donati asked in dead earnest: ‘How ever did you get into this garden?’ Florio gave a brief account of how he got there, which led the knight to sink into silent reflection. The young man repeated with great urgency his aforementioned questions, and Donati replied a bit distractedly: ‘The lady is a relative of mine, she is rich and powerful and her land holdings extend far out into the surrounding country. Sometimes she’s here, sometimes she’s there; occasionally you can even find her in Lucca.’ The string of words had a strange effect on Florio, as it now became clearer and clearer to him that what he had previously suspected in passing was indeed the case – namely that he had already seen the lady somewhere before in his early youth, but he could not remember where.

In the meantime, swiftly strolling, without knowing how they got there, they arrived at the gilded garden gate. It was not the same gate through which Florio had passed before. Surprised, he surveyed the unfamiliar terrain; far in the distance, beyond the fields, the towers of the city glistened, bathed in sunlight. Donati’s horse stood tied to the gate and, snorting, scraped the ground with its hooves.

Timidly, Florio expressed the desire to see the lovely lady of the garden again one day. Donati, who until then still seemed lost in his own thoughts, only now suddenly appeared to come to his senses. ‘The lady,’ he said with his usual cautious courtly manner, ‘will be pleased to make your acquaintance. Today, however, we would be disturbing her, and I, too, have pressing business to attend to at home. Perhaps I could come and pick you up tomorrow.’ Hereupon, he bid the youth a well-worded farewell, mounted his horse and soon disappeared among the hills.

Florio peered after him a long time, then rushed off like a drunken man back to the city. There the sultry heat still held all living souls prisoner in the cool darkness indoors behind venetian blinds. The streets and squares were deserted, nor had Fortunato come back yet. Such sad solitude was too suffocating for the blissful boy. He hastily saddled up his horse and rode back out into the wide, open country.

‘Tomorrow, tomorrow!’ his soul kept crying out. He was beside himself with joy. The lovely marble statue had come alive and stepped down from its stone pedestal into the flush of spring, the still pond had suddenly transformed itself into a sprawling landscape, the reflected stars sprouted into wild flowers and the resplendent spectacle of spring bespoke the joy in his heart. Enraptured, he rode through the hills and valleys around Lucca, past the splendid villas, cascades and grottoes, until the curtain of twilight fell over the joy-filled expanse.

The stars already studded the night sky as he slowly rode back through the quiet streets to his lodgings. On one of the solitary squares stood a big, beautiful house bathed in moonlight. Through an open window decorated with potted flowers he spied two women who seemed to be engaged in a lively conversation.

Flabbergasted, he clearly heard his own name repeated several times. And in the timbre of the stray words the wind wafted past his ears he thought he recognized the voice of the lady with the dazzling voice. But in the shimmer and shadows of moonlight he could not distinguish her figure from the fluttering leaves and flowers. He stopped below to try to listen in. But the two ladies noticed, and all went still again above.

Frustrated, Florio rode on, but as he rounded a bend he saw one of the ladies lean out and peer after him through the flower pots before pulling the window shut.

The following morning, no sooner had Florio shaken off the pleasant aura of his dreams and peered happily out of the window at the sparkling towers and cupolas of the city, than the knight Donati unexpectedly strode into his room. He was dressed all in black and today appeared uncommonly troubled, rushed and almost wild. Florio jumped for joy at the sight of him, as he immediately thought of the lovely lady. 'Can I see her?' he promptly cried out to him.

Donati shook his head, and with a downcast expression said: 'Today is Sunday.' Then he quickly continued, composing himself: 'But I wanted to take you along on the hunt.'

'On the hunt,' replied Florio, greatly surprised, 'today, on this day of God?'

'Don't tell me,' the knight interrupted with a fierce, repulsive laugh, 'you intend to wander arm in arm with the strumpets to church to kneel in a corner and piously implore God for his blessing when Lady Nose sneezes!'

'I don't know what you mean by that,' said Florio, 'and you may well laugh at me, but I couldn't go hunting today, not on the day of rest, when all work is suspended – everything seems so silent, festive and full of grace, field and forest bathed in a golden light to sing God's praises, as if the angels flew down from their heavenly blue home!'

Donati stood, lost in thought, at the window, and Florio thought he noticed him secretly shuddering as he gazed out at the Sunday silence of the fields.

In the meantime, the bells of the church towers began to toll, the sound of which wafted like a prayer through the clear morning air. Whereupon, as if gripped by a burst of fear, Donati reached for his hat and pressed Florio, almost beseeching the youth to accompany him, which Florio steadfastly declined. 'Off then!' the knight finally murmured under his breath, and, as if with a burst of profound discord, squeezed the startled youth's hand and dashed off.

Almost immediately thereafter, Florio was enveloped by a comforting feeling when, like a messenger of peace, like a breath of fresh air, the clear-eyed singer Fortunato burst into his room. He brought with him an invitation to a gathering the following evening at a villa just outside the city. 'Prepare yourself, my friend,' he said, 'to meet an old acquaintance there!'

Dumbfounded, Florio asked: 'Who?' But Fortunato laughingly refused to elaborate and promptly took his leave. 'Could it be the lovely singer?' Florio thought to himself, his heart pounding in his chest.

He then went to church, but he could not pray, he was just too giddy. Idly he ambled through the streets. Everything looked so clean and festive, well-dressed

gentlemen and ladies merrily made their way to church. But, oh, the loveliest was not among them! Yesterday's adventure came to mind as he headed back to the inn. He searched for the street and soon found the big, beautiful house again; but, strangely enough, the door was closed, all the windows were shut and shuttered, and nobody seemed to live there.

To no avail did he roam through the neighbourhood the whole of the next day to try and glean word of the whereabouts of his unknown beloved, or, if possible, to see her again. Her palace, as well as the garden he'd chanced upon on that happy noontime hour the other day, seemed to have disappeared, and Donati, too, was nowhere to be found. So his heart beat impatiently, bursting with cheerful expectation, when at last, on the evening of the invitation, with a tight-lipped Fortunato at his side, he rode out to the country house.

It was already pitch-dark when they got there. Surrounded by a garden, so it seemed, stood a stately villa ringed with slender columns, beyond the walls of which lay another garden planted with orange trees and all sorts of fragrant flowers. Tall chestnut trees stood scattered about, boldly stretching their oddly illuminated, far-reaching branches, spreading the light that emanated from the windows far into the night. The host, an elegant, merry, middle-aged gentleman, whom Florio could not recall ever having met before, graciously received the singer and his friend at the door and led them up a wide flight of steps to the hall.

They were met by sprightly strains of dance music, and a big crowd of guests bumped brightly and brilliantly about, bathed in the light of countless crystal chandeliers that glistened like a firmament of stars. Some danced, others were engaged in lively conversations, many were masked – and so, unintentionally, on account of their disguise, sometimes added an almost eerie aspect to the otherwise resplendent festivity.

Florio stood, frozen in place, blinded by the spectacle, another pretty picture surrounded by the rest. Then a graceful girl stepped towards him lightly draped in a Greek toga, her lovely hair artfully wreathed upon her comely head. A mask hid half her face and made the other half appear all the rosier and more entrancing. She curtsied, handed him a rose and promptly, swept up in the merriment, disappeared in the crowd.

At that same moment, he also noticed his host standing directly beside him with a scrutinizing gaze but quickly looking away when Florio turned towards him.

Surprised, Florio threaded his way through the chattering crowd. Nowhere did he find what he secretly hoped for, and he almost regretted having so light-heartedly followed the merry Fortunato to this lake of delight that seemed to lead him further away from the tall, lonesome figure he longed for. Meanwhile the free and easy waves of idle sociability washed over him with flattery and flirtation, taking the pensive youth unawares, changing his ideas. Dance music, even if superficial, is like spring, softly and powerfully falling upon us; and, as do the first signs of summer, its strains magically awaken all the songs asleep in us, stirring wells of emotion, making flowers and memories blossom, and the frozen stiffness of our life turns liquid and light, melting into a clear stream on which, with fluttering

pennants, the heart floats cheerfully on a bed of long-abandoned desires. So the general mood of merriment soon infected Florio too; he felt light-hearted, as though the heavy riddles that weighed upon his spirit could be easily resolved.

Curious now, he searched for the charming Greek. He found her engaged in a lively conversation with another masked reveller, but he noticed that, mid-sentence, her eyes scanned the room and already saw him coming from afar. He invited her to dance. She bowed her head in a friendly manner, but as soon as he reached for and held her hand, her graceful, vivacious manner cramped up. She followed him in silence and with a bowed head – whether in jest or sadness it was impossible to say. The music started up and he could make neither head nor tail of the glances cast by that lovely trickster, which struck him like the inscrutable looks of the charmed nymphs in ancient Greek depictions. ‘You know me,’ she whispered, barely audibly, when at one point in the dance their lips almost touched.

The dance finally came to an end, the music stopped suddenly – when, looking up, Florio thought he saw the spitting image of the same delicate dancer at the far end of the hall. She wore the same costume, a robe of the same colour, the same hairstyle. The picture of loveliness appeared to keep staring at him and stood stock-still amidst the swarm of scattered dancers, like a sparkling star, now hidden by passing clouds, now shining forth again. The graceful Greek did not seem to notice, or to take notice, of him, but rather, without saying a word and with a quiet, quick squeeze of the hand, took leave of her dancing partner.

In the meantime, the hall had emptied out. Everybody swarmed down into the garden to take a stroll in the warm night air, and that curious double image disappeared. Florio followed the flow and sauntered, lost in thought, along the high hedgerows. The countless lights cast a magical shimmer between the trembling leaves. The masks hovering here and there with their shrill voices, distorted outdoors, and the wondrous costumes of their wearers took on a still stranger, almost ghostlike appearance in the dim uncertain light.

Having inadvertently taken a turn down a lonesome path, a bit removed from the rest, he heard a sweet voice singing among the bushes:

> Over the moonstruck mountain peaks,
> Hailing softly from the distance,
> Tilting, as if it’s love they seek,
> The furtive treetops take a chance.
>
> Isn’t he a handsome lad!
> Nocturnal voices carry on.
> Secretly they make me glad
> Whispering me awake at dawn.
>
> Hold your tongues, you bubbling brooks,
> Better keep it from the day.
> The moon keeps casting knowing looks,
> So will the sun’s enquiring rays.

Florio followed the singing and came to an open, round patch of grass in the middle of which a fountain played cheerfully with the sparks of moonlight. The Greek girl sat like a lovely naiad on the stone rim of the pool. She had taken off the mask and

played thoughtfully with a rose, studying its reflection in the shimmering surface of the water. The rays of moonlight ran up and down her dazzling white neck; he could not see her face, as she had her back turned to him. When she heard the branches rustle behind her, the lovely creature leapt up, refastened the mask and bounded, swift as a frightened deer, back to the crowd of revellers.

Florio likewise returned to the colourful rows of strollers. Some delicate endearments sounded in the still, warm night air, and with its invisible threads the moonlight knitted the crowd together as in a golden net of love, in which only the masks with their grimacing expressions tore comic holes. Fortunato, in particular, had changed disguises several times that evening, and kept on playing curious and ever-different pranks to poignant effect, appearing ever anew and unrecognized, often even surprising himself with the audacity and drift of his tomfoolery, so that he sometimes fell silent when the others were inclined to laugh themselves half to death.

The lovely Greek, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen; she seemed deliberately intent upon avoiding Florio.

The host, on the other hand, took the young man under his wing. Artfully drawing him out, he asked him about his life to date, his travels and his future plans. Florio was hard pressed to reply honestly, since Pietro, as the man was called, kept studying him with an intensely enquiring look, as if behind all his questions there lurked a hidden purpose. He sought in vain to establish the reason for this obtrusive curiosity.

He had just pried himself free again from the former's importunate company when, slipping out of the door and turning the bend down a green alley, he met many masked figures, unexpectedly spotting the lovely Greek again among them. The masks chattered a lot, their conversations creating a curious cacophony, but though one of the voices sounded familiar he could not say for sure to whom it belonged. Soon thereafter, one after another, the masked revellers disappeared until finally, without at first realizing it, he suddenly found himself alone with the girl. Hesitating, she remained standing there, for a moment gazing at him in silence. The mask was gone, but a short white veil embroidered with all sorts of wondrous golden figures covered her little face. He was surprised that such coyness continued in his presence.

'You listened in on my singing,' she finally said in a not unfriendly manner. Those were the first clearly spoken words of hers he'd heard. The melodious sound of her voice swept through his soul; it was as if the music of it stirred the memory of every beloved, lovely and joyous moment he'd ever experienced in life. He apologized for his brashness and muttered in confusion how, in his solitude, the purling of the water fountains had lured him on. Meanwhile, the sound of several voices drew nearer. The girl looked shyly about and hastened off into the dark of night. She seemed to be pleased that Florio followed.

Boldly and with a greater intimacy he bid her now not to hide any longer or at least to tell him her name so that her loveliness not be lost to him again amongst the thousand bewildering images of the day. 'Enough,' replied the dreamlike presence,

‘take your flowers cheerfully, as life offers them, and don’t dig for their roots in the ground, it’s sad and silent down below.’ Florio looked puzzled; he could not conceive how such cryptic words could emanate from the mouth of the cheerful girl. The moonlight fell shifting through the trees on her comely figure. Now it seemed to him as if she were taller, slenderer and more noble still than she appeared before on the dance floor and by the fountain.

In the meantime they reached the garden gate. All the lanterns had gone out, only every now and then a voice could still be heard dying away in the distance. Outside, the sprawling circle of nature’s splendour hung solemn and still in the lovely moonlight. In the twilight, in a meadow that lay there before him, Florio noticed the faint outline of many horses and people milling about.

Here his companion suddenly stopped. ‘It would please me,’ she said, ‘to see you some time in my house. Our friend will lead you there. Farewell!’ With these words she pulled back the veil and Florio gave a start. It was the wondrously lovely lady whose song he’d overheard in the garden on that sultry midday. But, bathed by bright moonlight, her face looked pale and motionless, almost like the marble statue on the pond.

He watched now as she walked away across the meadow and was received by many servants in stately attire, who whipped a shimmering cloth off a snow-white steed, which she mounted. He stopped dead in his tracks, as if stunned with amazement, joy and a secret dread that welled up from within, until horses, riders and the whole strange spectacle disappeared in the night.

A call from the garden finally roused him from his dreams. He recognized Fortunato’s voice and rushed off towards his friend who, having missed him, had searched for him in vain. No sooner did Fortunato set eyes on him than he promptly sang out to him:

By the breeze
Born along,
Weak the knees
When scent is strong.
Hear her sigh,
Watch him rise,
Kiss the sky,
No reprise.
Heart grown fearful,
Wait too long,
Tender and tearful
Moonlight song.
Lips to lips whisper then,
Lover and beloved together again!

‘But where in heaven’s name have you been mooning about for such a long time?’ Fortunato concluded, laughing.

Under no circumstances was Florio prepared to reveal his secret. ‘Long?’ he replied, himself surprised. For, in fact, the garden had in the meantime become completely deserted, most of the lights were extinguished and only a few lanterns still flickered in the wind like will-o’-the-wisps.

Fortunato did not press the youth, and without exchanging another word they climbed the steps to the silent house. ‘I take back my words,’ said Fortunato as they reached the terrace overlooking the rooftop of the villa, where a small group of revellers was still gathered under the bright starry sky. Florio immediately recognized many faces he’d seen that first happy evening gathered around the tents. Amongst them he once again spotted his comely tablemate. But this time the merry wreath was missing from her hair; unfastened, unadorned, her lovely locks hung loose around her head and comely neck. He stood still, almost struck dumb at the sight of her. The memory of that evening overwhelmed him now with a strange melancholy force. It seemed to him as if it had already been long ago, things had changed so much since then.

The girl’s name was Bianca and she was introduced to him as Pietro’s niece. She seemed to shrink back as he approached her, and hardly dared look up at him. He expressed surprise not to have seen her the whole evening. ‘You saw me many times,’ she said quietly, and he thought he recognized her whisper. Meanwhile she observed pinned to his breast the rose that the lovely Greek had given him and, turning red in the face, cast her gaze to the ground. Florio noticed this – it suddenly struck him that he’d seen the Greek twice after the dance. My God! he thought to himself, bewildered; but who was it then?

‘It’s such a strange thing,’ she broke the silence, digressing, ‘suddenly to step from the noisy atmosphere indoors out into the wide, open night. Look how the clouds sleek so eerily across the sky, it’s enough to make you go mad if you watch too long; sometimes they look like towering moon mountains with dizzying slopes and terrible jagged cliffs that peer back at you like faces, at other times they look like dragons suddenly extending their long necks, and down below the river slithers by stealthily like a golden snake in the dark, and the white house over there looks like a marble statue.’

‘Where?’ Florio cried out at these words, roused from his thoughts.

The girl gazed at him in surprise, and both went silent for a while. ‘You’re planning on leaving Lucca?’ she finally said hesitantly and quietly, as though she feared a response.

‘No,’ replied Florio absently, ‘I mean, yes, yes, soon, very soon!’ She seemed to want to say something else, but suddenly turned her face to the darkness, swallowing her words.

Finally, he could no longer control his feelings. His heart was so full and beat so fast and yet he felt so blissful. He hastily took his leave, rushed out and rode without Fortunato or any other companions back into the town.

The window of his room was open; he cast another furtive look out. Outside everything was unrecognizable and silent like a strange, indecipherable hieroglyph in the bewitching shimmer of the moonlight. A bit apprehensively, he shut the window and flung himself into his bed, where, with a feverish frenzy, he drifted off into the most marvellous dreams.

But Bianca still sat a long while on the terrace. All the others had gone to bed, every now and then a lark awakened, fluttering with uncertain song through the still

air; the branches started rustling, faint dun-coloured morning lights flickered over her wide-awake face, framed by her carelessly tumbling locks. It is said that a girl who falls asleep with a wreath of nine flowers in her hair espies her future husband in her dreams. Having fallen asleep in this way after that evening among the tents, Bianca saw Florio in her dream. But it all proved to be lies, he was so evasive, so cold and distant. She plucked apart the false flowers which she had until now preserved as a wedding wreath. Then she leant her forehead on the cold railing and burst into bitter tears.

Many days had since elapsed when, one afternoon, Florio found himself at Donati's country house outside the city. At a table bedecked with fruit and cool wine they whiled away the sultry hours of the day in lively conversation until the sun had almost faded into night. All the while Donati bid his servant play his guitar, from which he managed to extract sweet sounds. The big, wide windows were flung open, allowing the warm evening air, infused with the scent of many flowers, to waft in. In the distance, amidst a merry mesh of gardens and vineyards, lay the city, whose windows emitted a cheerful chatter. Florio felt profoundly happy, as he kept thinking to himself of the lovely lady.

In the meantime hunting horns sounded in the distance. Now nearer, now further, they kept answering each other with pleasant notes from the green mountains. Donati went to the window.

'That is the lady you met in the beautiful garden,' he said, 'she's just now on her way home from the hunt to her castle.' Florio looked out. He saw the girl on the fine ambling palfrey passing through the green meadow below. A falcon attached by a golden chain to her belt sat on her hand; catching the rays of the setting sun, a diamond dangling from her breast flung a greenish-golden shimmer over the grass. She nodded in a friendly manner up at him.

'The girl is seldom home,' said Donati, 'if you like, we could still visit her today.' At these words Florio snapped out of the dreamy gaze he'd fallen into and could have hugged the knight. And soon the two sat outside in the saddle.

They hadn't been riding a long time when the palace, ringed by splendid columns, reared into view, surrounded by the beautiful garden, as if bedecked with a wreath of flowers. From time to time jets of water from the many fountains spouted, as though shouting for joy, high above the tops of the bushes, sparkling brightly in the evening's golden glow. Florio looked up in amazement, as if he'd never seen the garden like this before. His heart beat quickly with rapture and anticipation, as they finally rode up to the castle.

Many servants rushed forward to tend to the horses. The palace itself was made of marble and strangely fashioned like a pagan temple. The beautiful symmetry of all its parts, the towering columns that soared like youthful thoughts, all the artful decorations depicting stories from a glorious bygone time, and, finally, the splendid marble statues of gods standing in all the niches – everything cheered the spirits with an indescribable joy. Now they stepped inside the wide hall that ran the length of the castle. Everywhere they looked, in the gaps between the columns, the scents

and sights of the garden wafted and flickered forth.

On the wide, smooth-polished steps that led down into the garden they finally spotted below the lovely mistress of the palace, who gave them a gracious welcome. She was resting, half reclining, on a chaise longue covered with costly material. She had removed her hunting attire and her lithe figure was draped in a sky-blue gown drawn in at the waist by a wondrously elegant belt. A girl kneeling beside her held up a lavishly ornamented mirror, while many others were engaged in bedecking their lovely mistress in roses. Seated at her feet a circle of young girls took turns serenading her to the sweet strains of a lute, now in a joyous rapture, now a soft lament, like nightingales responding to each other's song on a warm summer night. The garden itself was all astir with merriment everywhere you turned. Many foreign-looking gentlemen and ladies wandered up and down amongst the rose bushes and fountains, engaged in lively conversations. Elegantly attired boys served wine and oranges and other fruits on silver platters covered with flowers. Further in the distance, bathed in the strains of lute music and the flicker of twilight that wafted over the flowery field, beautiful girls poked their heads out among the flowers, as if awakened from a midday dream, shook their dark locks from their foreheads, rinsed their eyes out in the clear water of the fountains and rejoined the joyous crowd.

As though blinded, Florio's gaze wandered with wild abandon amongst the scattered scenes, always returning with a drunken rush to the lovely mistress of the castle, who, unperturbed, went about her charming business, now rearranging the dark, fragrant wreath of flowers in her hair, now casting another look at herself in the mirror, all the while chatting playfully with the youths, finding artful words to discuss this and that. Every now and then she suddenly turned around and cast such an indescribably sweet gaze at him that reached deep down into the depths of his soul.

In the meantime night had already begun mingling darkness amongst the last flickering glimmers of daylight, the cheerful chatter in the garden faded by and by into the intimate whisper of love, and moonlight laid its enchanted glow over the lovely spectacle. Then the lady arose from her flowery bed and took cheerful hold of Florio's hand to lead him inside her palace, on which he kept showering words of praise. Many of the others followed them inside. They climbed a few steps up, then down; the others scattered, meanwhile, laughing and joking, down countless rows of columns. Donati got lost in the crowd, and soon Florio found himself alone with the lady in one of the castle's most resplendent rooms.

His comely guide now let herself sink onto several silken pillows lying on the ground, while flinging her luminous white veil in countless directions, now puffing it out in ever-lovelier, more elusive shapes, now pulling them back in. Florio looked on with burning eyes. Then, all of a sudden, outside in the garden someone started singing an exceedingly beautiful song. It was an old religious song he'd often heard in his childhood and had since then, in the sweep of passing impressions of his travels, almost forgotten. He became all flustered, as it seemed to him that the voice was Fortunato's. 'Do you know the singer?' he hastily asked the lady, who seemed

to be taken aback by the question and shook her head in emphatic confusion. Then she sat there a long while silently lost in thought.

Florio meanwhile availed himself of the opportunity to take a closer look at the room's curious decorations. It was only dimly lit by a few candles held up by two massive metal arms extending from the wall. Tall, exotic flowers artfully arranged in vases scattered around the room spread a bewitching scent. Directly across from him stood a row of painted marble columns, over the charming shapes of which the dancing lights cast their enticing glimmer. The remaining walls were covered with costly silken tapestries whose life-size images recounted scenes of exceptional quality.

In all the ladies depicted here, Florio, whose eyes lit up, was convinced he recognized the unmistakable figure of the lovely lady of the house. Here she appeared, falcon in hand, as he'd seen her earlier that day, riding with a young knight out on the hunt; here she was depicted in a gorgeous rose garden with another handsome young lad kneeling at her feet.

It suddenly occurred to him, as with the strains of the song outside, that back home in early childhood he had often seen such a picture of a ravishingly lovely lady dressed in the same clothes, with a knight at her feet, a vast garden stretching behind them with many fountains and artfully trimmed alleys, much like the garden he'd just beheld. He also remembered seeing images of Lucca and other famous cities.

Deeply moved, he told this to the lady. 'Back then,' he said, lost in memories, 'when I stood around like this on muggy afternoons, peering at the paintings in our lonesome summer cottage in the garden, admiring the curious towers in those cities, the bridges and alleys, taking particular note of the carriages and the stately cavaliers riding by, greeting the ladies in their carriages – I never thought that all that would one day come alive around me. My father often came to me and told me of some merry adventure he had had on his youthful military escapades in one or another of those depicted cities, whereupon he generally liked to withdraw into a lengthy thoughtful silence, strolling up and down in the garden. But I flung myself down in the tallest grass and stared for hours at the clouds shifting in the sky over the sultry landscape. The grasses and flowers waved quietly back and forth above me, as though they wanted to weave the strangest dreams, the bees buzzed so lazily around me and then were gone – dear God, it's all like a sea of silence in which the heart could sink in bitter-sweet sadness!'

'Enough of that!' the lady interrupted, as if distracted, 'everyone thinks he's seen me somewhere before, my face surges up and flowers in all youthful dreams.'

As she spoke she stroked the brown locks from the forehead of the handsome youth. But Florio stood up, his heart too gripped with emotion, and walked to the open window. The trees swayed outside, a nightingale flitted about, a bolt of lightning struck in the distance. The song kept wafting over the silent garden like a clear, cool current carrying the dreams of youth. The force of this music sank his spirit into deepest thought; he suddenly felt so out of place here, as though he'd stepped out of his own skin. Even the lady's last words, of which he did not quite

know what to make, left him with a strangely unsettling feeling – whereupon he muttered quietly and from the depth of his soul: ‘Dear God, let me not lose my way in this world!’ No sooner had he given vent to these words than a turbid burst of wind stirred up by the approaching storm struck him full in the face with a bewildering force. At the same moment he noticed grass and tufts of weed sprouting out of the window cornice, as in old walls. And suddenly a hissing snake went slithering out and hurled itself with its greenish-golden tail down into the abyss.

Frightened, Florio stepped away from the window and turned back to the lady. She sat motionless and silent, as if she were listening in. Then she jumped up in a flash, went to the window and, directing her words to the night, chided him in a charming voice. But Florio could not follow, for the fierce wind whipped her words away. The thunderstorm, meanwhile, seemed to come ever closer; the wind, in the rip-roaring gusts of which solitary, heart-rending shreds of the song kept being wafted upwards, went whistling through the whole house and threatened to extinguish the wildly flickering flames of the candles. Just then a long-lasting bolt of lightning lit up the darkening room. Whereupon Florio fell back a few steps, for it seemed to him as if the lady stood there before him with eyes shut tight, her face and arms pale white. But in the wake of the fleeting flash of lightning that terrible face vanished again as quickly as it had appeared. The same dimness that had filled the room before reasserted itself, and the lady once again regarded him with a smile – but in silence and with a wistful air, as though straining to hold back tears.

Tumbling backwards in fear, Florio had in the meantime collided with one of the statues standing against the wall. At that very moment the statue began to stir, the movement quickly spread to all the others, and soon all the statues stepped from their pedestals in a terrible shroud of silence. Florio drew his dagger and cast an uncertain look at the lady. But when he noticed that with every surging note of the song wafting up from the garden she grew ever more pallid, like a fast-fading twilight in which, finally, even the evening stars seem to be engulfed in the dark, he was gripped by a dire dread. For even the tall flowers in the vases began to twist and turn like a writhing wreath of snakes, all the knights on the tapestries suddenly resembled him and seemed to laugh scornfully; the two arms that held the candles groped and grew ever longer, as if a monstrous man sought to break free of the wall, the room filled up with eerie shadows, the lightning cast a fearful shimmer, in the glare of which Florio sensed the statues lunging at each other with such a terrible force that his hair stood on end. Gripped by terror, he staggered out of the room, through the empty echoing chambers and down the corridor of columns.

Out in the garden, beside the still pond he’d seen that first night, stood the marble statue of Venus. The singer Fortunato seemed to float in the middle of the pond, standing upright in a skiff, still strumming a few last chords on his guitar. But Florio took even the sight of his friend for another nocturnal chimera and kept running and running, until pond, garden and palace had disappeared far behind him. Bathed in moonlight, the city stood silent before him. Except for the distant horizon, illumined by the last flashes of a dying thunderstorm, it was a crystal-clear summer night.

The first bands of daylight already ringed the morning sky as he reached the gates of the city. He hastened to seek out Donati's lodgings to discuss with him all the bewildering occurrences of the past night. The house was situated on one of the promontories with a splendid view of the city and the entire surrounding landscape, so it was easy enough to find the lovely spot again. But instead of the stately villa he'd visited the day before, all he found was a low-roofed hut overgrown with vines and surrounded by a small garden. Pigeons playing in the first rays of daylight strutted, cooing, back and forth across the roof; a profound peacefulness reigned all about. At that very moment a man with a scythe on his shoulder emerged from the house, singing:

> Night has faded, day is breaking
> Through night's shroud, to work awaking.
> Darkness is the devil's way,
> Up and at 'em, seize the day!

The man suddenly interrupted his singing upon spotting the stranger rushing towards him, pale-faced and with dishevelled hair. Bewildered, Florio asked after Donati. But the gardener had never heard the name and seemed to take Florio for a lunatic. His daughter leant across the threshold, invigorated with a breath of the cool morning air, and studied the stranger with a wide-eyed look of surprise. 'My God! Where have I been all this time!' Florio muttered, half to himself, and flew in a great haste back through the gates and down the still-empty streets towards his inn.

Here he locked himself in his room and gave himself over completely and utterly to a contemplative reflection. The lady's indescribable beauty, the way she slowly paled and sank her ravishing eyes, stirred up such boundless longing in his heart of hearts that he felt an irresistible yearning to die then and there.

He kept on morbidly brooding and daydreaming all that day and into the following night.

At the crack of dawn he was back in the saddle before the gates of the city. The tireless urging of his faithful servant had finally convinced him to leave this region for ever. Slowly now and lost in thought, he travelled along the lovely road that led from Lucca out into the countryside, past darkening shrubs and flowers in which the birds still slept. Just outside the city he was joined by three other riders. Not without a hidden dread he recognized one of them as the singer Fortunato. The second was Miss Bianca's uncle, in whose country house he had danced on that fateful evening. The latter was accompanied by a lad who rode beside him in silence and without looking up. The three had resolved to visit all of Italy, and graciously invited Florio to join them. To which, however, he replied with a silent bow of the head, neither accepting nor declining the offer, and hardly took part in their conversations.

The rosy tint of dawn, meanwhile, spread its cool lustre over the splendid landscape, which prompted the merry Pietro to remark to Fortunato: 'Look how strangely the faint rays of daybreak play up there amongst the stones of the old ruin on the mountain! How many times, as a young boy, did I climb around those stones with stunned amazement, curiosity and a secret trepidation! You know so many old

legends, can you not enlighten us as to the origin and the fall of that castle, concerning which such strange rumours have spread hereabouts?'

Florio looked up at the mountain. Ringed in solitude stood an old collapsed rampart, lovely, half-sunken columns and a heap of hand-hewn stones, the whole overgrown with a lush green tangle of tendrils, hedges and tall weeds. There was a pond beside it, over which rose a partially damaged marble statue brightly lit in the rising dawn. It was clearly the same region, the same spot where he had ambled in the enchanting garden and seen the lady. Florio shuddered in secret at the sight of it. But Fortunato said: 'I know an old song about it, if you care to hear it.' Whereupon, without thinking twice, he sang out, filling the crisp morning air with his clear, pleasant voice:

A picture from the past,
In resplendent decline,
Of ruins grand and vast,
O'ergrown with branch and vine.

An ancient realm,
Heaven reclaimed it all, and ah!
Such bygone glory overwhelms –
This is Italia!

When spring winds blow,
Sweeping o'er the green,
A quiet reawakening below
Transforms the scene.

There's something stirring in our hearts
And in this sanctuary of the gods.
We sense it with a start,
Where once immortals trod.

Listen to the trees,
Their rustling carries voices.
With ardent reveries
The valley rejoices.

And hidden by the fragrant veil
Of spring's sweet reawakening,
The ancient magic casts the spell
Of gods engaged in secret flings.

Dame Venus hears the call
Of birds in lively chorus,
Enchanted, she stands tall
Shaking off the flora.

Around each column she curls,
Reclaiming her sacred site,
Winking at the world,
In this season of sweet delights.

Seeking out the hallowed nooks
In the ruins of her old shrine,
She beams with a beneficent look
And greets spring's every sign.

But all is barren now,

The place itself is hushed.
Grass grows where once the ardent bowed,
And where the winds now rush.

Where once they raved,
Diana sleeps in the woods.
Neptune's napping beneath the waves.
And Cupid isn't in the mood.

From time to time a siren rises
From the foamy deep,
And with each note reprises
A wistfulness that makes hearts leap.

And Venus herself must ponder,
The world she knew is gone.
In vain do her eyes now wander,
For her lovely body is turned to stone.

For o'er the land and billowing waves,
In silent majesty,
Another woman now holds sway
Until eternity.

In her arms a blessed child
This wondrous woman holds,
And from her eyes a heavenly smile
Spreads mercy throughout the world.

There in the lustrous light
The blessed son awakes,
Shaking off the pall of night,
To seize the day, for heaven's sake.

And like the lark, atwitter in the trees
Man's immortal soul takes flight,
Born by the sultry magic of the breeze,
To wrestle wrong from right.

Everyone fell silent upon hearing the song. 'That ruin,' Pietro finally spoke up, 'would then once have been a Temple of Venus, if I understood you correctly?'

'Indeed,' replied Fortunato, 'in so far as can be surmised from the disposition of the entire structure and the surviving ornaments. It is also said that the radiant goddess found no peace. Every spring, from the terrible silence of the grave she reawakens in the green solitude of her fallen temple to celebrate earthly pleasure, and through devilish delusion manages to lead carefree young spirits astray. Excluded from the realm of eternal rest, lost in body and soul, the deluded shun life, condemned as they are restlessly to roam hither and thither, torn between wild indulgence and terrible remorse, and ultimately destroy themselves, succumbing to madness. Time and again in the selfsame place, people claim to have witnessed the jousting of ghosts, now spotting a wondrously lovely lady, now a host of handsome cavaliers, beckoning passers-by to enter an imaginary garden and palace.'

'Have you ever been up there?' asked Florio, roused from his reverie.

'Just the evening before last,' replied Fortunato.

'And did you not see anything that made you wince?'

‘Nothing,’ said the singer, ‘except for the silent pond and the mysterious stones shimmering in the moonlight, and the endless starry firmament above. I sang a pious old song, one of those timeless tunes that waft like memories and the whisper of night, born in some far, familiar haunt, gentle airs that pass through the idyllic garden of our childhood and serve evermore as a safe haven, the sound of which helps all those with the hearts of poets find their bearings later in life. Believe me, my friend, a poet worth his salt can hazard much, for, free of pride and profanation, art has the power to name and tame the wild spirits that rear up out of the earth and reach for us.’

No one said a word. The sun had just risen before their eyes and flung its sparkling luminescence over the earth. Whereupon Florio shivered all over, dashed a short stretch on ahead of the others and sang with a clear voice:

> Here am I, Lord! Blessed be the light
> That through the torrid heat in my breast bursts
> With all its healing might,
> Coolly quenching my thirst.
>
> Free at last! Released from the spell,
> Too giddy to stand tall,
> My heavenly Father knows me well,
> And will not let me fall!

After all the mighty mood swings that grip and rend our entire being, a crystal-clear serenity takes hold of the soul, like farm fields after a thunderstorm that grow greener, bursting with life. Feeling profoundly refreshed, Florio took a vigorous look around and quietly awaited his companions, who came riding up slowly through the sea of green.

The good-looking lad who accompanied Pietro had, in the meantime, lifted his comely head like a sunflower greeting the first burst of daybreak. In stunned amazement, Florio recognized Signorina Bianca. He was shocked to see her looking so pale; gone was the ravishing blossom in her cheeks of that evening when he first set eyes on her frolicking among the tents. Roused out of the carefree games of childhood, the poor girl had suddenly been struck with the wallop of first love. And when, thereafter, in the grip of dark forces, her dearly beloved Florio became so distant and pulled further and further away from her, until finally she gave him up for lost, she sank into a deep melancholy, the secret source of which she dared reveal to no one. But wise Pietro knew all too well what ailed her, and resolved to take his niece on a trip to foreign climes, where, under distant skies, he hoped, not to wean her off the pain, but to soothe and comfort her with distraction. To travel untroubled and, as it were, to shake off the painful past, she felt compelled to dress as a boy.

Florio looked with gladness at the comely figure. A strange blindness had until now shrouded his gaze as if with an insidious fog. He was stunned to see how lovely she was! He spoke to her, greatly stirred, with fervent words. She rode along beside him in silence and with downcast gaze and a modest smile, surprised by this unexpected attention, as though she did not deserve such kindness. Only every now and then did she look up at him through her long black lashes, her soul laid bare in

that look, as though thereby tendering an ardent plea: ‘Deceive me not again!’

In the meantime they’d reached a windswept hill, and behind them the city of Lucca with its dark towers sank in the morning mist. Whereupon Florio turned to Bianca and said: ‘It’s as if I were born again, as if everything is going to be all right now that I’ve found you again. With your leave, I never again want to part.’

In lieu of a spoken reply, Bianca returned his gaze with an uncertain, questioning look, still half withholding her burgeoning burst of joy, the picture of an angel framed by the blue morning sky. The rising sun greeted them full in the face with its long golden rays. The trees stood bathed in the glow, countless larks sang out, swishing through the clear air. And so the joyous couple and their companions rode merrily through the sparkling meadows towards the blossoming embrace of Milan.

Descent into the Mines*

1826

Heinrich Heine

I found the descent into the two best Klausthal mines, the Dorothea and the Karolina, very interesting, and I would like to describe the experience in some detail.

A half-hour's walk outside the city, you happen upon two big blackish buildings. There you are immediately received by miners. They are dressed in dark, generally steel-blue-coloured, wide jackets hanging down over the belly, pants of more or less the same colour, a wrap-around leather smock tied in the back and a small green felt cap, completely rimless, like a lopped-off bowling pin. The visitor likewise dons the same attire, except for the leather smock, after which he is taken in hand by a miner, a foreman, who lights his pit lamp and leads him towards a dark opening resembling a chimney sweep's hole, climbs down to chest level, instructs the visitor to keep a tight grip on the ladder and bids him follow fearlessly.

The descent is, in fact, a risky business; but being as yet ignorant of the workings of the mine, you are initially oblivious to the real danger. The fact that you are obliged to pull off your clothes and slip on this dark prison-like apparel already gives you a curious feeling. And now you are supposed to sink to your hands and knees and climb down, and the dark hole is so dark, and God knows how long the ladder is going to be. Yet soon you realize that the rungs leading down into the black abyss do not belong to a single ladder but rather comprise a series of fifteen to twenty ladder joints, each of which leads to a tiny platform on which you can stand and in the midst of which a new hole leads down to a new length of ladder.

I first climbed down into the Karolina (the filthiest and most cheerless Miss Karolina that I have ever met). The ladder joints are muddy and wet. And down you go, from one length of ladder to the next, the foreman in the lead, and the fellow keeps telling you: it isn't really dangerous, you just have to make sure to grasp the rungs firmly, and don't look down at your feet, and don't get dizzy, and for God's sake don't step on the side board, where the whirring cable is just now hoisting up the vats of ore, and where just two weeks ago a careless fool fell down and unfortunately broke his neck.

There is a bewildering hubbub and hum of activity down below; you are forever bumping against beams and cables hoisting up vats of hammered ore and buckets of water that has seeped out of the rock. Sometimes you also happen upon hollowed-out corridors, called *Stollen*, in which you can glimpse the growing piles of ore, and where the lonely miner sits all day, laboriously hammering the lumps of ore out of the wall.

I never did get down to the very bottom, where, as some say, you can already hear the Americans crying, ‘Hurrah, Lafayette!’ on the other side; but between you and me, as far down as I got seemed deep enough for me – what with the unceasing rumble and whirl, the ghastly grind of the machinery, the subterranean drip drip drip, water trickling everywhere, terrestrial vapours rising from the depths and the pit light flickering ever more faintly in the lonely night eternal. It truly was stupefying, harder and harder to breathe, and only with great effort did I hold fast to the slippery rungs of the ladder.

I did not suffer any so-called panic attack, but, strangely enough, down in those subterranean depths, I suddenly remembered my experience last year, at about this time, of a storm on the North Sea, and right then and there it felt cosy and pleasant to recall the ship tossing to and fro, the trumpeting winds blasting away, and in the midst of it all the sailors kicking up a merry row, and everything bathed in God’s fresh, open air. Yes, air!

Gasping for air, I climbed the several dozen ladder lengths back up to the surface, and my guide led me through a narrow, very long passageway blasted through the mountain to the Dorothea mine.

It is airier and fresher here, and the ladders are cleaner but also longer and steeper than those in the Karolina. My spirit grew more buoyant here too, especially as I once again noticed scattered traces of life. For faint glows shifted about in the distance; miners with their pit lights soon emerged to the surface with the greeting, ‘How’re you doin’?’, and, with the same reply from us, they climbed on by; and like a friendly, quiet and at the same time torturously enigmatic memory, they flitted by with their profoundly lucid expressions, the sombrely pious, somewhat pallid faces of these young and old men eerily lit in the shimmer of the pit light, the faces of men who have worked a shift in dark, lonesome mine shafts and now longed for the dear light of day and the eyes of wife and child.

My cicerone himself was a sterling fellow of pure and simple German nature. With a deep sense of satisfaction, he showed me the very spot where the Duke of Cambridge dined with his entire entourage during his visit to the mine, and where the long wooden dinner table still stands today along with the big silver ore stool on which the Duke sat. This table will stay standing here as an eternal souvenir of the occasion, said the good miner, and with fire in his voice he recalled the many festivities they celebrated back then; how the whole mine shaft was decked out with lanterns, flowers and wreaths; how a mine musician played the zither and sang; and how the dear, delighted, portly Duke drank round after round. And he swore that many miners, he himself in particular, would gladly lay down their lives for the dear portly Duke and the entire House of Hanover.

I am always greatly stirred to see how this feeling of fidelity expresses itself in such simple syllables. It is such a lovely sentiment! And it is such a truly German sentiment! Other nations may be more nimble and witty and pleasure-loving, but none is so faithful as the faithful German nation. Did I not know that fidelity was as old as the world, I’d say a German heart had invented it. Good old German fidelity – that’s no newfangled flourish. At your courts, oh you German lords, they ought to

sing again and again the song of Faithful Eckart and the evil Burgundian, who had his henchmen kill the children of Eckart, whose fidelity to his liege lord did not lag thereafter one iota. You have the most faithful subjects among all nations, and you err if you believe that the sensible old reliable dog might suddenly have gone mad and snapped at your sacred heels.

Like good old German fidelity, the little pit light led us safely and soundly, with hardly a flicker, through the labyrinth of shafts and pits; we climbed up out of the steamy night eternal, and the sunlight was beaming – 'How're you doin'?'

Most of the miners live in Klausthal and in the adjoining little mountain hamlet of Zellerfeld. I visited a fair number of these valiant folk, was welcomed into their modest, cosy lodgings and listened to a few of their songs, which they sang to the sweet accompaniment of the zither, their favourite instrument. I had them tell me old mountain fairy tales and also rattle off their prayers, which they liked to recite in unison before climbing down into the dark pit, and I prayed along with them. An old foreman even proposed I stay with them and become a miner and when, nevertheless, I took my leave, he bid me deliver greetings to his brother who lives not far from Goslar and give many kisses to his dearly beloved niece.

As static and quiet as the life of these people might appear, it is still a truly animated existence. The trembling ancient crone seated in the cosy nook between the big cupboard and the warm oven, herself as old as the hills, may have already been seated there for a quarter-century, and her thinking and feeling were definitely intertwined with every corner of this oven and every hand-carved notch and crevice of this cupboard. And cupboard and oven are alive, for a human being imbued them with a piece of his soul.

It is only through such a deeply contemplative life, through such an immediate rapport between man and his surroundings, that the German fairy tale could come into being, for its uniqueness consists in the fact that not only animals and plants, but also seemingly altogether lifeless things have the capacity to speak and act. For only such contemplative, harmless folk, cloistered away in their forest cottages, in that still, secret, cosy corner of these low mountains, could fathom the inner life of such things. To them, these objects have acquired an essential, consequent character, a sweet mingling of whimsical caprice and pure human impulse. And so, in their wondrous yet seemingly self-evident way, do fairy tales portray them: the needles and pins escaping from the tailor's pincushion only to get lost in the darkness; the drowning blades of straw and lumps of coal determined yet to ford the stream; a bickering shovel and broom that wilfully fling themselves from the landing; the propositioned mirror that naturally reveals the face of the loveliest lady; and even a drop of blood that bursts into speech, dark and fearful words of sympathy and foreboding.

For the very same reason, our life in childhood is so infinitely full of meaning – childhood, that time when everything is equally important to us, when we hear it all, see it all and take it all in with the same equanimity. It is so unlike adulthood, when we become more intentional, dwelling on the particular, having cashed in the clear gold of contemplation for the paper money of dictionary definitions, gaining in life

experience what we lose in the deep lustre of looking.

Now we are grown-up, noble folk; we keep changing apartments; the maid cleans up daily and rearranges the furniture as she sees fit, those tables and chairs in which we take little interest, since they are new and Hans will in any case pawn them to Isaac tomorrow. Even our clothes remain strange to us, and we hardly know how many buttons are attached to the jacket we are wearing this very minute. We do, after all, change clothes with such frequency that no single garment maintains any lasting connection with our private and public persona. Why, we can hardly still remember what that brown waistcoat looked like, the one that used to draw so much laughter and on whose broad stripes the dear hand of an old flame so sweetly lay!

The old woman seated between the vintage cupboard and the warm oven had on a flowery skirt of outmoded pattern, the wedding gown of her late beloved mother. Her great-grandson, a blond, twinkly-eyed little boy dressed up as a miner, sat at her feet, counting the flowers on her skirt. She must already have told him many a story of this skirt, many serious, enchanting stories that surely the boy will not soon forget, stories that will waft back into memory when, soon enough, as a grown man, he will have to entertain himself while working alone in the dark night of the Karolina mine; stories which he will perhaps recount when his beloved grandmother is long since dead and he himself, a silver-haired, weary ancient, will sit in the circle of his grandchildren, in the cosy nook between the big cupboard and the warm oven.

PART TWO

My Gmunden

1919

Peter Altenberg

You're already making a long face reading this title.

Aha, yet another depiction in his matchless condensed manner of 'seashores', 'evening atmospheres', 'water's eternal newness', we know all that. No, this time something else! In autumn I was once the last guest left of the summer season. One evening, a middle-aged baron and learned doctor of philosophy introduced himself; his family was native to these parts. He requested the honour of my acquaintance. Of course! He was very cultivated and very well bred. On the eighth day of our incipient acquaintance he said to me one evening in the course of a stroll:

'Why, pray tell, don't you give up your criminal plans to take my life?!'

'Since I have no such plans, I cannot give them up!'

'I have nothing against you personally, you are merely the operative agent of a higher power to whom both you and I are beholden! Nevertheless, exceptionally, I enjoin you to cease and desist in this plot to bring about my annihilation, socially, and in all other senses!' From then on I let myself be drawn into this peculiar duel between a healthy spirit (my own) and a sick one in the naive hope of making him realize through logical argument the folly of his delusion. Unfortunately, each acknowledgement that he'd been wrong about me made him all the more unhappy, desperate and above all dogged in his resolve! In his view, I was simply being shrewder, more cunning in my deception. For instance, he bought himself ten Egyptian cigarettes. Upon his emergence from the tobacconist's, he said: 'The cigarettes were poisoned on your orders!' I suggested he save them for me, said I'd smoke them all in front of his eyes from then till nightfall. Whereupon he hissed: 'Swindler!'

One evening he said: 'I hope your supper tastes particularly good this evening!'

'Why?'

'Because it's your last!' Whereupon he pulled out a Browning revolver. He walked me home as usual. I switched on the light in my room, after ten minutes switched it off again, remained seated in the dark for a half-hour, then I ventured down the street to see the mayor, Dr Wolfsgruber. The old man lay sick in bed. Upon learning the name of the person in question the mayor passed word through his chambermaid: he'd receive me in his downstairs parlour, but without any lights on. He said to me: 'You have my profound thanks on behalf of our little town! Don't go to bed, take the earliest train out – unfortunately we thought he was harmless! Thanks again, and be assured of my prompt attention to all necessary actions that must, alas, be taken, in light of your report!'

It was, however, the opinion of the dear little town that '*meshuganeh* attract each other!'

The Magic Egg

1919

Mynona[*]

Imagine! Just imagine a giant egg, an egg as big as, say, St Peter's Basilica, the Cathedral of Cologne and Notre Dame all rolled into one. Now imagine this: I – not being lazy by nature – am wandering through the desert – thirst, camel, white skeleton in the brownish yellow sand, an El-selas-kerschüler[†] dagger in my belt, caravans, oases, jackals, cisterns, desert sheikhs, the whole desert bit – whew!! – when, towering and arching over me, I find this beautiful giant egg. Imagine the sun showering it with rays that bounce and bound off the egg's own inner light. My first thought: it's a mirage. Nothing doing! I gently tap it. My acute sensitivity to touch and temperature confirm the egg's existence. I asked it: 'Anybody in?' No answer! Anyone else would have walked on by, it wouldn't have seemed strange to him or God knows what else. In such cases, however, I never rest until I know exactly what I'm dealing with. So I go walking round the egg – and just at eye level I discover a dark green button the size of a walnut. I press it. The egg sinks mightily down into the ground, till nothing but its tip is still peeking up out of the desert sand. Just imagine the effect this had on me. At the pointed apex of the tip I found the same sort of button. I press – blam! An electric shock: the egg glided suddenly, though smoothly right back up again. Imagine, right there in the middle of the desert I repeated this game a hundred times or more. Imagine it! I was as happy as a child. Finally, however, little by little, I became ever more curious about the deeper significance of this childish game. So I examine the egg again and finally, after an extensive search, I find a fine seam that appears to run vertically through the entire egg. I look back at the button, I touch it without pressing and without thinking, I turn it ever so slightly – it just falls right over; the egg lays itself on its side; the tip on which it had been resting thrusts itself up at me out of the earth like the most appealing portal, a jasper-yellow egg yolk gleams at me invitingly. Just imagine – then a smile, as they say, lit up my otherwise ugly mug. On the egg yolk I read the following inscription:

> Desert wanderer,
> ye who for the first time
> glimpse the egg of eggs
> and – as you can imagine! – take
> a childish delight in it,
> know ye:
> that this egg alone can transform
> the desert into an Eden.
> Eia!
> All you need to do is solve the mystery of the egg!

Accursed reader, have you forgotten the seam? This seam likewise ran vertically across the bulging egg yolk portal. But it had no button on it. I knocked and it sounded as it does when, with your ears held shut, you tap with your fingertip on your knuckles. I take another close look at the circular border between yolk and shell, and just imagine: to the right of the crack, the fissure, I spot an opening maybe the size of my finger; and I proceed to stick my finger in carefully. But just imagine, I couldn't get it out again. What would you have done? Appealed to the nearest police station? No way, better keep Europe out of this! And besides, what gentleman would ever leave his finger in the lurch. Since I couldn't get my finger out again, I pushed inward with all the might of my hand – and you guessed it, the yolk allowed itself to be rolled back, I got my finger free and peered into the pit of the egg. But since I can't rightly decipher anything, I give that egg yolk a mighty shove upwards and – just imagine – I climbed into the egg. I had the feeling I was walking on yellow snow. And once my eyes had grown accustomed to the dim twilight, I suddenly spotted a wide and splendid staircase with alabaster steps winding its way upwards. So I climb up to a kind of scenic plateau and feast my eyes on the spectacle inside the egg. Over here lies the portal, there the peak, beneath me yellow snow, above me glittering through the seam the aforementioned desert sun. Just imagine my situation! All in all, however, I discovered nothing else really out of the ordinary, except maybe for the tip of the egg where something seemed to be lurking. From the plateau on which I stood there was another flight of stairs set in the opposite direction leading downwards, onto which I strode, descending to the tip. And all around me that eternal egg shell vaulting! That eternal yellow snow or whatever it was. And when I finally reach the tip and am standing there, that very moment the facing portal rolls back shut, can you imagine! I scream. I can only offer you this piece of advice: never scream inside an egg! It makes such a rolling, thunderous racket, you can't stand it. And not only did the portal roll shut, but I notice that the egg is setting itself upright again, and the very same staircase I just trod has become a steep ladder, on the uppermost rung of which I am perched. And suddenly, just imagine, I feel the desert egg hurtling back downwards to the centre of the earth. And yet the lighting remains a lovely pale crepuscular, for look: the egg-shell keeps on emanating a phosphorescent glow. And then finally the strangest thing of all happened: the egg spoke to me – that is, its phosphorescence flickered so articulately that I instinctively understood. Just imagine, the egg claimed that the rejuvenation of the entire desert depended on its annihilation. An egg with a sense of humour! I couldn't keep from smiling. Then the egg atmospherically communicated the well-known thesis: 'The desert is growing!' And had I noticed that the egg could climb and sink? What about it! I replied. Then it told me to climb down the ladder to the lower portal, open it and dispose of a tiny, albeit repulsive, obstacle; I would then receive further instructions – see them, that is. My only thought meanwhile was: how do I make tracks out of this uncanny egg? Or am I doomed to disappear in the pit under the egg! But with cheerful, phosphorescent glee, the egg encouraged me to climb on down, and I felt as if I had been carried on soft wings, rather than that I had actually gone under my

own steam. But that portal offered some resistance. Consider if you will that it did after all lie several hundred metres below the surface of the earth, and that I could not know what sort of hell would break loose if I were to roll the egg yolk down there back up again. But as I wavered, the egg flickered phosphorescent encouragement. Finally I found the little opening again with my finger and shoved the thing up again. But the moment I managed to clear the way, a storm wind burst forth, picked me up in its wake and slammed me up against the tip of the egg so hard I almost suffocated, and before I knew what had happened to me, the tip flipped up like a lid and I found myself lying in the desert sand again.

Better make tracks! was my first thought – a kingdom for a camel or a dromedary or whatever! But there was no ship of the desert in view! Instead – imagine my surprise when I discovered that someone had crawled after me out of the egg, a kind of mummy all wrapped up in bandages and rags. The lady – or do you suppose it was a gentleman? – spoke to me in a language which, strangely enough, I immediately understood, even though I had never heard it before – picture it as a kind of music without a scale – communicating the following:

'Impudent, gullible, fearful, but not altogether antipathetic human! Chance, oh harmless mortal, has honoured you! Till now, wandering across the pitiful surface of the sick secret of my desert, having already been touched by my breath, you are no longer insignificant enough to misunderstand my intentions. Know that the desert is the same (only more so) as the rest of the earth, *leonum arida nutrix*; has been almost barren ever since the egg, the principle of fertility, was wrenched out of the centre of its sphere, lying dried out and unshelled at the surface, and I, the soul of souls, have been electrified into a mummy by you, oh sublime idiot! You've outdone yourself by your own deed! Complete it now! Just press that button again once I'm back in the egg and the tip will fly shut. By the same degree as slowly, slowly, but unfailingly this egg will sink to the centre of the earth, it will become smaller and smaller; its fertile potency, however – all the more concentrated once having arrived at the centre and having been expunged and pummelled into pure centre – will deliver up that fertile potential luminously outwards and upwards all the way up to heaven. You too, my good man, though now still nothing but an insignificant dog, will feel it: to live is to realize your genius, to feel and act like a god! Now then!'

Do you know perchance that precious old baron who under similar circumstances had the habit of repeating 'Amazing, amazing!' a hundred times in succession? So I let the mummy hop quietly back over the edge of the eggshell. And just as quietly, I gladly admit, I heaved the fragile lid shut again. But the button? Never did I go near it again! I pulled up the tail of my coat that had become all yellow and dusty from being dragged around the egg's interior, took it under my arm and got out of there as quickly as I could. What the hell's this supposed to mean anyway: 'principle of fertility'? Shall I be the cause of the world's overpopulation? Shall I allow a putrid mummy to involve me – me of all people! – in some unsavoury business? God knows, the world is no egg-beaten omelette, no crêpe aux confitures! Can the world's salvation be dependent on an incidental gesture? The press of a button? The

fact is, I wouldn’t be able to find the egg again. But if the reader feels like it, this egg would be a commendable object for your next Easter hunt! So what if I ran off like a coward! Who knows! Maybe it takes greater courage to have a close call with a new incarnation of the inconceivable than to brave great dangers for an inkling of some abstract good. Test yourself! Just think, would you now this very moment want to bring about the good of humanity, the salvation of the whole wide world by the mere press of a button? Would you not be seized by a terrible bout of fear, as before, in the case of one of those easily arrangeable martyr’s deaths? And even so I let a tear or two fall in my mind’s eye over that desert egg; I should have – yes! I should have pressed the button!

A New Kind of Plaything

1913

*Mynona**

‘But leave me now to *this* nursery, my own private lair, where every childish whim is welcome.’
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Let our beloved little ones get to know the *real* thing, life as it is *really* lived! Don’t tell me they’re too young to grasp the indelicate details. Or are you perchance afraid to rouse their slumbering consciousness of it all – lock, stock and barrel? How pathetic! Do you want to raise a pack of cowards?

It’s absolutely ill advised and disastrously dangerous to take the little darlings for incomplete. They’re just as complete as we grown-ups, only in every respect more compact, smaller, more sensitive, weaker; but nothing human is strange to them, nor could it possibly be so!

Consider this! The pedagogical principle whereby we are supposed to keep children for as long as possible sheltered from the real, full, round life with all its rough edges, is absurd. It’s not by cloistering their consciousness that we best raise them to live deliberately, but rather by letting our children playfully paddle about and fly around in the thick of that fearful element from early on and thereby learn to overcome and master the terrifying or repulsive or evil or base or malevolent.

It is precisely in this precious period of innocence and guileless gumption that all those things that will later be deemed dangerous, liable to lead astray, the source of endless guilt, as it were, can, rather, be so finely filtered through the purest puerility that, finally, if generations of our precious progeny were truly prepared for everything – I mean, really *everything* that lies ahead – then their whole life would be lived in childlike innocence. Permit me, in the spirit of such ruminations, to make a few recommendations regarding children’s playthings.

The toy has heretofore been conceived by … cowards. Of course we do, for instance, have enough toy soldiers, castles, cannons, armour and weapons to fill the air with the bang bang and boom boom, the hiss and crackle of bloody battle. But there’s no blood in it, the whole business of play remains too dry. Just introduce a little blood (artificial, of course!!) and, boy, oh boy, what a time they’ll have. It’s perfectly simple: just manufacture hollow soldiers with perforated holes. Knock them over and they spill red-tinted water. To achieve grenade-like effects all you need are magnetized little soldiers whose limbs dislodge on impact; you can reassemble them easily enough. Injured aviators and infantry primed for pulverization can best be blown out of glass, like Bolognese bottles and vials. A revered commanding officer, say Hindenburg, in the form of a spinning top, would

work wonderfully well: he'd just have to be outfitted with radial sickles. Wound up and dropped by a miniature Zeppelin, just let him loose on the enemy. And as he mows down the masses of cannon fodder, the Hindenburg spinning top intones the melody 'Hail, the Conquering Hero!' or 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles'. It's the optimal way to prime our German tots with patriotism from the start. Mass graves are a must in every box of toy soldiers, as are a miniature military recruiting office and a field hospital in which the little doctors can perform operations, amputations and such. How in heaven's name do we hope to make the *real* battlefield engagement of the future a matter of child's play if it hasn't first been tried out in the nursery? I had a finely crafted field hospital, complete with corpses, wounded, doctors, nurses, attendant widows, orphans and other personnel, including little figurines dressed in black, fashioned for my kids, and it proved to be a great success! In this way, early childhood impressions help to transfigure and mitigate the future effect of *real* mourning. And how profound! How small, for instance, are our sufferings before God, for whom we grown-ups are but children after all.

Playing firing squad is a splendid game; which is why a sizeable civilian population ought also to be included in every military toy-box, along with little barricades, or you couldn't play 'revolution'. Every mother would then instantly stop tearing her hair out, relieved of the torment of worrying what to give little Helmut for Christmas.

No doubt about it! Children's playthings can never be *realistic enough* in design. What is my son supposed to make of a cow that *can't* be milked? Just insert a miniature rubber balloon udder and it works, and it's a lot of fun too.

And Aunty Paula still wrings her hands, fretting: should I *enlighten* the little ones about the birds and the bees? Yes, of course, Aunty, you should! And to help, you need a woman-in-childbirth doll. Precisely because children so innocently process such impressions, they *should* be acclimatized early, and thereby protected against later lies: playthings *are* prophylactic. It's a shame that a false decency makes me mince my words. Modesty is no doubt a lovely virtue, but its automatic connection with cowardice, instead of pluck, is repulsive, it's prudery. In life there is a modest *and* an immodest denuding of the human body. True modesty is not at all applicable to the *thing itself*, but rather to the manner in which such things are revealed; the *thing itself* is so much a veil over all indecency that, viewed objectively, it can dispense with all veils, and, rather, stand naked, with complete modesty.

Our initial inclination is prematurely to disapprove of the notion of a doll's house bordello. Why? *Because* it exists in real life? Cowardice! It *ought* not to exist?! Very well! If you will. Then, precisely, for that very reason, better immediately to *diminish* its insalubrious effect on the under-age. The enticement of sin depends on surprise. So why not make Buster *blasé about the forbidden*? Indeed, why not open the entire Pandora's box of the *illicit* as a toy!

What an enchanting idea! A charming miniature morgue, the whole works; a dissection table; a maternity ward for the unwed with midwives on hand, but no trace of the father. Wonderfully effective little assassinations, complete with

explodable, easy-to-reassemble princes. Department stores with perfectly functioning arson attacks, burglaries, little pickpockets primed at will. All-purpose murder victims along with the accompanying murderer dolls outfitted with the appropriate tools of the trade.

Just imagine lovely little hearses and the cute coffins that come with toy cemeteries and crematoria, with tiny graves and urns, tombstones with replaceable inscriptions, little pastors and other dolls of mourning.

And why should the child not have his own little museum? It would help introduce presentiments of the value of paintings, sculptures etc. Our little progeny can hardly be fortified with enough presentiments!!! The child must not be kept in a state of ignorance, he must experience *everything*.

And why, come to think of it, withhold his own airy Reichstag? Why leave him without a feather-light embalmed body of a monarch to mourn? My children recently laughed themselves silly over the sweet little Socialist gathering that came complete with general strike and crying mothers, on which they let loose one of those deadly spinning tops. I was truly touched to see with what character-strengthening disdain they learnt to take in and look down on everything human. Do you think this bird's-eye perspective might weaken their resolve? Nonsense! Does it hamstring the eagle, that lofty symbol of all winged important persons (WIPs, if you will)?

Even epidemics and famines can be enacted for instructional purposes. Hungering rubber dolls with bellies designed to swell and shrink would be a blast! Abscess- and blister-pocked dolls would be terribly funny. At least my children will no longer do without their own guillotine and gallows. And while we're at it, a homeless shelter is a most tantalizing thought. Ought we likewise (with the aid of stink bombs) give our dear little ones an appreciation of little rotundas and subterranean establishments for the satisfaction of bodily needs? On this I dare not insist. On the other hand, I am definitely in favour of a play paradise where children can re-enact man's fall from grace; I'm for toy churches (snappy little synagogues for the Jewish juniors), miniature mosques, etc.

Toy trains without the capacity to enact a train crash are only *half* the fun. If we ever want our children to become complete persons, we must not keep anything human from them. Their innocence already *innately* sets limits; and later in life, when these limits are little by little extended, their pre-primed spirits will be prepared for new temptations. The fact that the little darlings can laugh at *everything*, even at the underbelly of life – that is precisely the splendid elaboration of their blessed capacity callously to shrug off the unseemly, that would otherwise, were they to dwell on it, burden them with unnecessary sadness. It is the kind of healthy humour of future generations reared in this fashion, from whom nothing more will be withheld!

Let me not refrain from touching upon a solemn matter: no nursery should henceforth be without a memorial plaque for its present resident already nailed on the wall!

The Seamstress

1894

Rainer Maria Rilke

It was in April of 188—. I was obliged to change lodgings. My landlord had sold his house and the new owner was determined to rent out as a single unit the entire floor, including my modest little room. For a long time I searched unsuccessfully for another. Finally, tired of looking, I took, almost sight unseen, a room on the third floor of a building whose length occupied no small part of the narrow side street.

From the very first days, my little cubicle already seemed downright cosy to me. Through my two little windows (whose panes, made of myriad morsels of glass, attested to the considerable age of the house) I looked out far and wide over grey and red rooftops, over sooty chimneys, onto the blue mountains in the distance, and could see the sun rise, a luminous ball balanced on the hazy ridge. My own furniture, which I had had brought over from my former residence, made the cramped confines more liveable, as I had hoped it might, and the housekeeping provided by the wife of the concierge left nothing to be desired. The staircase was not overly steep and could be climbed without thinking; indeed when I alighted, lost in thought, my feet were enticed to clamber all the way up to the attic. In short, I was pleased with the place, all the more so since neither children nor organ-grinders played in the dark courtyard below.

Years have since elapsed. The time of which I speak is lost to me in the dusk of bygone days, the glaring colours of experience have faded and blurred. It is as if I were speaking of things that happened, not to me, but to someone else, perhaps to a very close friend. Consequently, I need have no fear that vanity will induce me to lie; I will write it out openly, clearly and truthfully.

I didn't spend much time at home in those days. Early, at 7.30, I went to the office, dined at noon in a cheap restaurant and, as often as possible, spent my afternoons at the home of my fiancée. Yes, I was engaged at the time. Hedwig – let's call her that – was young, kind, educated and rich – a quality that my contemporaries valued above all else. She issued from an old, enterprising family that had finally succeeded, through industry and thrift, in establishing a household even the young gentlemen of note were glad to visit, for, all its elegant trappings notwithstanding, a free and easy *joie de vivre* held sway which kept any latent ennui from wafting up over the rim of the teacups. The youngest girl, Hedwig, was, moreover, everybody's darling, as she combined with her cultivation a lovable frivolity that somehow made the most inconsequential chatter interesting and stimulating. She possessed more spirit and spunk than her two older sisters, was

sincere, cheerful and – there is no doubt that I loved her.

I can speak openly now. A year after we broke off our engagement, she married a young officer of noble lineage, but died bearing his first child, a curly-blonde-haired little daughter.

I usually stayed till six o'clock at her parents' home, where a big group gathered every day, and then took a stroll, attended the theatre and returned home at ten o'clock, only to repeat the same ritual all over again the following day.

Early every morning, slowly descending my three flights of steps, I ran into the concierge wiping the white flagstone floor in the hallway downstairs. He greeted me and started a conversation. Every day the same. About the weather first, then how I liked my apartment, and such. Since the old man never wanted to end the conversation, I invariably asked after his children, whereupon he sighed and snarled between clenched teeth: 'It's the cross I have the bear! They give me much worry, sir!' That was the end of it. Once, on a Tuesday, just to make small talk, I asked who lived next door to me. The question was answered the same way it had been posed: just like that, in passing. 'A seamstress, a poor thing, an ugly one …' he muttered without looking up from the floor. That was all.

I had long since forgotten this bit of information, when I met her – it was indeed the seamstress, as I rightly surmised at the time – in the dark vestibule downstairs. It was on a Sunday morning. I had slept late and was just stepping out, while she, with a small book in her hand, was probably just coming home from church. What a pitiful creature: between her pointy shoulders, draped with a shoddy green, almost floor-length coat, a head bobbed back and forth, the most striking features of which were a long, thin nose and hollow cheeks. Her narrow, slightly parted lips revealed filthy teeth, her chin was angular and protruding. The only remarkable feature of this face were the eyes. Not that they were beautiful, but they were big and very black, albeit lustreless. So black, in fact, that her pitch-black hair looked almost grey in contrast. All I know is that the impression her appearance made on me was by no means a pleasant one. I believe she avoided my gaze. I had no time, in any case, to dwell any longer on this inconsequential encounter, since right outside the door I fell upon a friend, in whose company I spent the entire morning. I subsequently forgot altogether that I even had a neighbour, since, though we lived practically back to back, next door everything remained perfectly still night and day. And things would well have gone on that way, if not one night, by chance – or what else should I call it? – the unexpected, the never suspected happened.

Towards the end of April, my fiancée's parents held a party which, having been discussed and prepared far in advance, came off splendidly and lasted late into the night. That evening I found Hedwig ravishing. We sat and talked a long time in the small green salon, and I listened happily as, half ironically but with a fervid, childlike naivety, she sketched the contour of our future life together, painting every little joy and sorrow in dazzling colours, anticipating our happiness as a child anticipates a Christmas tree. A pleasant sense of satisfaction infused my breast with a comforting warmth, even Hedwig said she had never seen me so happy. The same mood, moreover, was shared by one and all; toast followed toast. And so it

happened that we only reluctantly broke up the party at 3 a.m. Carriage after carriage drove up to the door. The few pedestrians soon dispersed in all directions. I had more than a half-hour's walk ahead, and so I hastened home, all the more quickly since the April night was cold, dark and foggy. All wrapped up in my own thoughts, it didn't take me half as long as I'd imagined before I found myself at my front door. Slowly I unlocked the door and carefully locked it again after me. I struck a match to light my way from the lobby to the foot of the stairs. It happened to be my last match and soon went out. I felt my way up the stairs, still thinking about the pleasant hours I'd spent that evening. Then I reached the top of the stairs. I put the key in the lock, turned once and slowly opened …

There *she* was standing before me. She. A dim candle burnt almost all the way down to the wick still scantly lit the room, from which the unpleasant odours of sweat and fat wafted towards me. Dressed in a filthy unbuttoned blouse and a dark petticoat, she stood there at the edge of the bed, hardly surprised, so it seemed, her unwavering glassy gaze fixed upon me.

I had obviously stumbled into her room by mistake. But I was so taken aback, so frozen in my tracks, that I did not utter a word of apology, but did not leave either. I was filled with revulsion, I know; but I stayed. I watched as she stepped over to the table, shoved aside a dish of scattered leftovers of a dubious dinner, removed the clothes from a chair and invited me to sit down. With a quiet voice, she simply said: 'Come, sir!'

Even the sound of that voice revolted me. But I obeyed, as though following some unknown force. She spoke. I don't know about what. She sat down and all the while remained seated on the edge of the bed. In the dark. I could only make out the pale oval of that face, and intermittently, when the dying candle flickered, those big eyes. Then I got up. I wanted to go. The latch on the door resisted my efforts. She came to my assistance. There – right next to me – she slipped and fell, and I had to pick her up. She pressed herself against my breast and I felt the proximity of her hot breath. An unpleasant sensation. I wanted to pry myself free of her grip. But her eyes stared so intently into mine, as though their gaze wove an invisible web around me. She pulled me ever closer to her, ever closer. She pressed hot wet kisses on my lips … The candle went out.

The following morning I awakened with a heavy head, a backache and a bitter tongue. She lay asleep on the pillow beside me. Her pale, sunken face, her gaunt neck, her flat, naked bosom instilled terror in me. Slowly I sat up. The damp air weighed heavy on me. I looked around: the dirty table, the worn thin-legged chair, the wilted flower on the window-sill – everything evoked misery and atrophy. Then she stirred. As though in a dream, she placed a hand on my shoulder. I stared at that hand: the long, thick-knuckled fingers with the filthy, short, thick nails, the skin at the fingertips brown and pierced with needle holes … The sight of her filled me with revulsion. I leapt up, tore open the door and ran into my room. There I was able to breathe more easily. I also know that I slid shut the latch on my door – as far as it would go.

One day followed the next in much the same way as before. Once, maybe a week later, when I had already lain down to sleep, I accidentally hit my elbow against the wall. Realizing that this unintentional knock was immediately answered, I remained perfectly still. Then I fell asleep. In my half-slumber, it seemed to me as if my door were being opened. The next moment I felt a body pressing up against me. It was her beside me. She spent the night in my arms. Many times I wanted to throw her out. But she peered at me with those big eyes, and the words withered on my lips. How awful it was to feel the warm limbs of this creature next to mine, this ugly, prematurely aged girl; and yet I simply could not find the strength to …

Sometimes I met her on the staircase. She walked past me, as she had the first time – as if we did not know each other. Very often she came to me. Quietly, without a word, she entered and kept me riveted with her look. I was unable to say no.

Finally, I decided to put an end to this business. It seemed to me to be a crime against my bride to share my bed with this woman who clung to me with such desperate insistence, and who could not even – lay claim to the licence of love!

I returned home much earlier than usual and immediately locked my door. At the stroke of nine, she came. Since she found the door locked, she went away again; she might have supposed I was out. But I was careless. I shoved the heavy desk chair somewhat precipitously back against the wall. This she surely noticed. The next moment there was a knock at the door. I remained silent. Again. Then frantically and incessantly, the knocking continued. Now I heard her sobbing – a long, long time … She must have spent half the night at my door. But I held firm; I felt that this perseverance had finally broken the spell.

The next day I met her on the staircase. She moved very slowly. When I came up close, she opened her eyes. I panicked: what a frightful glint and menace in that look … I laughed at myself. Fool! To think that I could be afraid of such a girl! And I peered after her as she clumsily tackled the stone steps, hobbling down …

That afternoon, my boss needed me, so I had to skip my customary visit at Hedwig's. That evening, when I returned to my room, I found a note from the father of my bride which astonished me no end. It read:

> … under the given circumstances, you will well understand that, much to my regret, I am obliged to annul your engagement with my daughter. I thought to entrust Hedwig to a man who had no other commitments. To spare my child any such discoveries is a father's duty. You will, honoured sir, well understand my path of action, as I too am convinced that you yourself would in time have informed me of the way things stand. I remain, sincerely yours, …

It is difficult to describe how I felt. I loved Hedwig. I had already made myself at home in the future which she had so charmingly painted for me. I could not imagine my future without her. I know that I was at first overcome by a heavy pain, which made tears come to my eyes, before I could even bring myself to surmise the cause of this curious rejection. For it was definitely curious, of this there could be no doubt. I knew Hedwig's father, who was himself the very epitome of conscientiousness and fairness, and I knew that only a momentous occurrence could have led him to take such a course of action. For he respected me and was too fair-minded knowingly to do me wrong. I did not sleep the entire night. A thousand

thoughts shot through my mind. Finally, towards morning, I was so tired that I was overcome by sleep. Upon waking, I noticed that I had forgotten to lock my door. In the meantime, she had not come to me. I heaved a sigh of relief.

I rushed to get dressed and, excusing my absence for a few hours at the office, hastened to the home of my bride. I found the door locked and when, upon my repeated ringing, no one appeared, I thought that they must have gone out. The concierge could easily have been occupied in the yard, where he could not hear the sound of the bell. I decided to come by at the usual time that afternoon. And so I did. The concierge opened the door, was surprised to see me and said that I must surely know that the family had gone on a trip. I fell into a panic, but acted as if everything were in order and merely asked to speak to Franz, the old butler. He then told me in detail how everyone, but everyone, had gone away, after yesterday afternoon when a curious scene had taken place.

'I stood,' so he said, 'in the hallway, polishing the silverware, just as a strange woman made her miserable entry and begged me to take her to Miss Hedwig. Naturally, I did not accede to her request – I've got to know 'em before I let 'em in …' I nodded impatiently. A thought came to mind … 'Well to cut a long story short,' the chatty old gent continued, 'she made such a scene and screamed and yelled at my refusal to accede to her request, that my honoured master came out. She pleaded with him to hear her out and swore she had important news. He took her into his office. She stayed in there for a whole hour. A whole hour, can you imagine, sir! Then she came out and kissed my master's hand …'

'What did she look like?' I interrupted him.

'Pale, haggard, ugly.'

'Tall?'

'Quite tall.'

'Eyes?'

'Black, like her hair.' The old gent kept babbling on. I knew enough. Every word of that terrible letter suddenly became all too clear to me; a bitter rage welled up in me. I left the servant abruptly and went bounding down the front steps. I ran through the streets all the way home. At my front door there were a few people milling about. Men and women. They spoke heatedly and quietly with one another. I gruffly shoved them aside. Then, three steps at a time, I bounded up the steps, without taking a single breath. I had to get to her, to tell her … I had no idea what I would say, but I felt that the right words would come to me at the right time …

On the staircase I passed men. I took no notice of them. Once upstairs I tore open the door. I was struck by a potent odour of carbolic acid. A curse curdled on my lips. There she lay on the grey linen of her bed dressed in nothing but a nightshirt. Her head was twisted back, the eyes shut. Her hand hung limp. I came closer. I did not dare touch her. With gaping lips and bloodshot eyelids she looked altogether like she'd drowned. I shuddered. I was alone in the room. The setting sun cast a cold light on the filthy table – on the edge of the bed … I bent down to that woman. Yes, she was dead. The colour of her face was bluish. She emanated a foul odour. And I was overcome by revulsion …

The Island of Eternal Life

1943

Georg Kaiser

The ambitious young reporter Flanagan is seated before his mighty boss, the newspaper magnate Warren. He complains of the monotony of his work, that reporting no longer satisfies him. Always the same catastrophes: fires, earthquakes, scandals – political and private. Always the same sensations. Warren asks Flanagan: what subjects would he prefer? Flanagan would like for once in his life to depict the opposite of all that – to be sent on an assignment to a place where nothing happens. Where time consists of nothing but silence. Just then the captain of a schooner, a relative of Warren's, drops in at the office to say goodbye. And Warren suggests to Flanagan that he join the captain on his slow sailing ship on which nothing ever happens. Nothing but waves – more wind, less wind. Flanagan accepts and boards the vessel, hoping to experience nothing.

But he experiences the greatest adventure of his life. For a long time the schooner sails quietly. Nothing happens. It really appears as if the lowest level of experience has been reached, a coefficient close to absolute zero. Then one day a storm breaks and rages out of control, wreaking havoc with the helm. The ship is a toy ball, a plaything of the crashing waves. Finally the storm settles. But the captain does not recognize these quiet waters. The tempest has driven his vessel far off-course. Now in any case the helm needs fixing and other damages must be attended to. The work takes time.

In the distance, the rocky coast of an island rises into view. Flanagan is bored of waiting and wants to visit the island. The captain counsels against it: the steep cliffs make a landing dangerous. Still Flanagan persists and rows himself ashore in a little dinghy.

He never returns. After completing the repairs on the masts and rudder, the captain waits a little while longer before he finally gives up hope and declares Flanagan a victim of the cliffs. He gives the order to set sail. Later in New York he breaks the news to Warren: that the young reporter failed to return from his visit to a rocky island. Warren mourns the loss of the promising young man.

Thirty years later a luxury liner crosses those same waters in which the schooner lost its way. Armed with binoculars, curious passengers study the rocky coast – and as to their question, what sort of an island this might be, the captain can give no answer. A magnetic disturbance set his pilot off-course, he is unfamiliar with the island and unable to locate it on any of his charts. Suddenly a passenger spies a dinghy approaching from the island. The captain halts his engines and awaits the arrival of the lone oarsman. It is Flanagan, the lost reporter, who promptly climbs

aboard.

But it is the unchanged Flanagan, the way he was thirty years ago when he rowed off from the schooner. He has not aged at all, his clothes are perfectly intact. He is in precisely the same condition – perfectly preserved, as it were.

Flanagan soon realizes the secret of the island: it is the island on which people never age, the island of eternal life. Flanagan keeps the secret to himself, revealing not a shred of it to the passengers of the luxury liner, who are stunned by his old-fashioned clothing and ignorance of recent events.

In New York, Flanagan enters the office of his since-aged chief, Warren – and offers him the greatest sensation the world has ever known: the island of eternal life has been discovered. Warren immediately grasps the unique significance of this discovery and wants to buy it off Flanagan. The stakes get higher and higher. Warren finally accedes to Flanagan's outrageous demands and invites him over that evening to clinch the deal – says he'll send his private limo to pick him up. And that very evening, Flanagan is found murdered in the back seat – his notes are filched. He is the first to fall victim to the island of eternal life.

Having laid his hands on Flanagan's notes, Warren issues them as a serial in his paper. The success is phenomenal. Warren grasps his new-found power: he alone knows the location of the island, he holds the deed to eternal life. He receives fantastic offers for plots of land. But he takes his time. The suspicion arises that it's all a big swindle. A commission comprising incorruptible individuals is assembled – and, following extensive investigations, their findings are that the ground of this island contains chemical substances that forestall the process of decay and that a thousand-year life expectancy in such a place is a distinct possibility. But Warren himself derives no benefit from their favourable findings. He was found dead in the prison cell in which he was held on suspicion of fraud, pending the return of the commission. Visited in prison by the ghost of the murdered Flanagan, he committed suicide.

Now the notes and chart indicating the location of the island belong to the United States government. It is decided: no one will be able to purchase a plot on this island, on which, in any case, there is only room for a few hundred. A plot of land there and the gift of eternal life will be accorded as the highest honour only to the most meritorious. All countries are hereby requested to submit the names of their most notable representatives – an international committee will decide the worthiness of each candidate.

But what does it mean to be worthy? What merits mark a man as a true representative of his nation? What does it mean to be a hero? Opinions clash. It is impossible to come to an agreement. Human attitudes are simply too diverse. Hatreds smoulder. The world is on the brink of war. Chaos threatens.

The international committee decides: the island of eternal life will be the eternal hotbed of unspeakable evil. The longing for endless, deathless life must release instincts that reduce man to a beast shamelessly inclined to devour his neighbour. The last shreds of humanity are lost.

This realization is reached at the final hour and the decision is made to destroy the island. A massive explosion is set off – and the island sinks in a cloud of stones and dust into the ocean depths. No cliffs reveal the spot – no navigational chart recalls the location of the island of eternal life.

In the Penal Colony

1919

Franz Kafka

‘It is a curious piece of equipment,’ said the officer to the travelling investigator, casting a somewhat admiring look at the apparatus, with which he was, after all, well acquainted. The traveller appeared, only out of politeness, to have accepted the commandant’s invitation to witness the execution of a soldier condemned to die for insubordination and disrespect of a superior officer. Nor was the interest in this execution particularly great in the penal colony. In any case, aside from the officer and the traveller, the only other people present in this isolated sandy little vale surrounded by barren cliffs were the condemned, a dull-witted, big-mouthed man with unkempt hair and unshaven face, and a soldier holding the heavy chain, to which the former was attached by little chains shackled to his ankles, wrists and neck, these chains, in turn, attached to each other by connecting chains. The condemned, moreover, looked so docile and dog-like that it seemed as though one could let him run around freely on the surrounding slopes and merely had to blow a whistle for him to come running to his execution.

The traveller had but little appreciation for the apparatus and paced up and down behind the condemned man with barely veiled disinterest, while the officer took great pains to attend to the last preparations, now crawling under the device which was anchored deep in the ground, now climbing a ladder to inspect its upper parts. These were tasks that actually ought to have been delegated to a machinist, but the officer attended to them with great zeal, either because he was an enthusiastic proponent of the device, or because, for other unspecified reasons, one could not entrust the work to anyone else. ‘Everything’s ready now!’ he finally called out and climbed down the ladder. He was inordinately tired out, took deep breaths with an open mouth and had two dainty women’s kerchiefs stuffed into the collar of his dress coat.

‘These uniforms are much too heavy for the tropics,’ the traveller remarked, rather than, as the officer had expected, asking after the apparatus.

‘No doubt,’ said the officer and washed the oil and grease off his hands in a readied bucket of water, ‘but they remind us of the Fatherland; we dare not lose touch with the Fatherland. But do pay attention to this device,’ he promptly added, wiping his hands in a cloth and simultaneously pointing to the apparatus. ‘Up until recently we had to do it by hand, but now the device works automatically.’ The traveller nodded and followed the officer. The latter sought to offset any possible malfunctions and said: ‘Naturally there are glitches from time to time; I do hope we won’t have to suffer any today, but one has to be prepared. The apparatus must,

after all, run for a full twelve hours. But if there are any problems I can assure you that they're of little consequence and can be promptly repaired.'

'Don't you want to sit down?' he asked at last, pulled a cane chair out of a pile and offered it to the traveller, who could not very well refuse it. Now the traveller sat at the edge of a pit into which he cast a fleeting glance. It was not very deep. On one side the dug-up dirt was heaped in a mound, on the other side stood the apparatus. 'I don't know,' said the officer, 'if the commandant already explained to you how it works.' The traveller replied with an uncertain wave of the hand; the officer could have asked for nothing better, for it was now up to him to explain the functioning of the device. 'It is,' he said, reaching for and leaning on a connecting rod, 'an invention of our former commandant. I myself collaborated on the very first experiments and was involved in all the fine-tuning that led up to its completion. But he alone deserves credit for its invention. Have you heard of our former commandant? No? It is no exaggeration to maintain that the entire installation of the penal colony is his brainchild. We, his friends, were already well aware at the time of his death that the colony's design was so comprehensive that even if his successor had a thousand new plans in mind, there would be nothing in the original concept he could change for a good many years. Our prognosis has been confirmed; the new commandant had to acknowledge this. It's a shame you never knew the previous commandant! But be that as it may,' the officer interrupted himself, 'I'm blabbering on, and his apparatus stands here before us. It consists, as you can see, of three parts. Over the years somewhat popular appellations have evolved for each part. The bottom is called the bed, the top the inscriber and the middle section here is called the harrow.'

'The harrow?' asked the traveller. He had not listened attentively, the sun inflicted all too merciless an assault on this shadow-less valley, it was difficult to gather one's thoughts. All the more praiseworthy did the officer seem to him, zealously elucidating everything, decked out in his tight-fitting dress uniform hung with epaulettes and aiguillettes, assiduously engaged as he spoke, screwdriver in hand, in tightening a loose screw here and there. The soldier seemed to share the traveller's disinterest. He had the chains of the condemned man attached to both his wrists, rested with one hand on his rifle, let his head hang down and did nothing. The traveller was not surprised at this, since the officer spoke French, in which language, no doubt, neither the soldier nor the condemned was conversant. It was, therefore, all the more remarkable that the condemned man, nevertheless, took pains to follow the officer's explanations. With a sort of sleepy complaisance he invariably turned his gaze in the direction in which the officer pointed, and as the latter was interrupted by a question from the newcomer, he, too, turned his attention to the traveller now, along with the officer.

'Yes, the harrow,' said the officer, 'the name fits. The pins are set in a harrow-like arrangement, and the entire device is handled like a harrow, even if only in one place and with a good deal more artistry. You will, by the way, grasp my meaning in a moment. The condemned is laid here on the bed. I would, if you don't mind, first like to describe the apparatus and only then to set it in motion. That will permit you

to appreciate its operation better. Also, a cog wheel in the inscriber is a bit too worn down; it screeches something awful when in use, so much so that it's impossible to communicate; spare parts are unfortunately hard to come by here. Now then, here is the bed, as I said. It is completely covered with a cotton wad, the purpose of which you will soon discover. The condemned is laid belly-down on this bed, naked of course; here are straps for the hands, here for the feet, here for the neck, to keep him in place. Here at the head of the bed, where, as I said, the man is laid face-down, you can see this little felt wad easily regulated so as to be pressed into the man's mouth. Its purpose is to prevent the condemned from screaming and biting his tongue. Of course, the man is compelled to accept the wad, since, on account of the throat strap, his neck would otherwise be broken.'

'That's cotton?' asked the traveller, bending forward.

'Yes indeed,' the officer replied, 'go ahead and touch it.' He grabbed the traveller's hand and ran it over the bed. 'The felt is woven in a very particular way, which is why you can't recognize it as cotton; I will get to its purpose presently.' Already favourably impressed, shielding his eyes with his hand against the sun, the traveller gazed upwards at the device. It was quite a large contraption. The bed and the inscriber were both about the same size and resembled two dark trunks. The inscriber was suspended some two metres above the bed; both were fastened at the edges by four brass bars that almost shimmered in the sunlight. The harrow hung from a steel band between the trunks.

Hardly noticing the traveller's initial indifference, the officer now appreciated his budding interest; he paused in his explanations so as to give the traveller the time to quietly take it all in. The condemned man mimicked the traveller; since, shackled as he was, he could not bring his hand to his eyes, he simply squinted.

'So the man is laid on it,' said the traveller, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs.

'Yes,' said the officer, pushed the brim of his cap back a bit and wiped his flushed face with his hand, 'now listen! Both the bed and the inscriber are powered by their own electric batteries; the bed needs them for itself, the inscriber to power the harrow. As soon as the man is firmly fastened the bed is set in motion. It trembles in tiny, very rapid palpitations, simultaneously to the side and up and down. You will have seen similar devices in sanatoria; only in our bed all the movements are exactly calibrated; they have to accord precisely with the motion of the harrow. It's up to the harrow, you see, to carry out the actual sentence.'

'What precisely does the sentence say?' asked the traveller.

'You don't know that either?' the officer replied, astonished, and bit his lip. 'Forgive me if perhaps my explanations sound muddled; I beg your pardon for this lapse. It was, in fact, the commandant who customarily presented these explanations in the past; the new commandant dispensed with this honourable duty; the fact that he did not even deem it necessary to inform such an important visitor' – the traveller tried with raised hands to demur to such lofty esteem, but the officer insisted – 'to inform such an *important* visitor of the terms of the sentence, that is another innovation which' – he had a curse on his lips, bit his tongue and simply

said: ‘I was not informed of it, the guilt of the condemned is not my affair. That having been said, I am perhaps the best equipped to explain our manner of sentencing, for I have here’ – he tapped his breast pocket – ‘the pertinent drawings and designs of the former commandant.’

‘Drawings done by the commandant himself?’ asked the traveller. ‘Was he everything in one? Soldier, judge, builder, chemist and draughtsman?’

‘Indeed he was,’ said the officer, nodding with a blank, meditative expression. Then he looked somewhat critically at his hands; they did not seem to him quite clean enough to touch the drawings; he walked over to the bucket and washed them again. Whereupon he pulled out a leather étui and said: ‘Our sentence does not sound severe. The condemned is to have the command he disobeyed inscribed with the harrow on his body. This condemned man, for instance’ – the officer pointed at the man in chains – ‘will have inscribed on his body: Honour your superiors!’

The traveller cast a fleeting glance at the condemned man; when the officer pointed at him he held his head down low and seemed to be straining all his powers of hearing to learn something about his fate. But the movement of his tightly pressed, puffy lips clearly indicated that he could not understand a thing. The traveller wanted to pose various questions, but at the sight of the man merely asked: ‘Does he know his sentence?’

‘No,’ said the officer, impatient to proceed with his explanations, but the traveller interrupted him:

‘He doesn’t know his own sentence?’

‘No,’ the officer repeated, pausing a moment, as if he expected the traveller to justify his question, and then said: ‘It would be senseless to inform him. He will, after all, experience it in the flesh.’ Inclined though he was to fall silent, the traveller sensed the condemned man turning his gaze towards him; the condemned man appeared to be asking if the procedure just described met with his approval.

Consequently, the traveller, who had already leant back in his chair, bent forward again and asked: ‘But the fact that he was condemned, that he must surely know!’

‘No again,’ said the officer and smiled at the traveller, as if expecting a few more curious declarations.

‘No,’ said the traveller, stroking his forehead, ‘then the man still doesn’t even know the court’s response to his defence?’

‘He had no occasion to defend himself,’ the officer said and looked askance, as though he were talking to himself and wished to spare the traveller the shame of having to have such self-evident matters revealed to him.

‘But he must surely have had the opportunity to plead his defence,’ the traveller said, rising from the chair.

The officer recognized that he ran the risk of being held up for a long time in his explanation of the apparatus, walked up to the traveller, slung his arm in his, pointed at the condemned, who, realizing that all attention was so clearly directed at him, stood up straight – an action likewise abetted by the soldier’s tugging on the chain – and said: ‘This is how matters stand. I was summoned to this penal colony to serve as executioner. Despite my youth. I also assisted the former commandant in

all matters of punishment and know the device better than anyone else. My actions presupposed the certainty of guilt. Other courts cannot follow this principle, as they comprise several judges and also have higher courts to contend with. That is not the case here, or, at least, was not under the former commandant. The new commandant has indeed already expressed the desire to have a say; I have managed for the moment to divert his attention to other matters, and will, I trust, manage to keep doing so. You wished to have this case explained; it's as simple as all the others. This morning a captain reported that this man, assigned to him as his lackey, and who sleeps in front of his door, overslept. He is duty-bound at the stroke of each hour to stand up and salute at the door. To be sure, hardly a daunting responsibility, but a necessary one, as the man must remain alert both as guard and servant. The captain wanted to confirm last night that the man was doing his duty. At the stroke of two he opened the door and found him rolled up and fast asleep on the floor. He fetched a riding crop and struck him full in the face. But instead of leaping up and begging forgiveness, the lackey grabbed his master by the legs, shook him and cried out: "Throw the whip away or I'll eat you." These are the facts of the case. The captain reported to me an hour ago, I wrote down his statement, to which I promptly added the judgment. I then had the man put in irons. All this went smoothly. Had I first called him in for interrogation it would only have resulted in confusion. He would have lied, and had I succeeded in refuting these lies, he would have promptly replaced them with fresh lies, and so on and so forth. But I've got him and don't intend to let him go. Is everything quite clear now? But time is passing, the execution was already scheduled to begin, and I'm still not finished explaining how it works.' He urged the traveller back into his chair, once again approached the device and began: 'As you can see, the harrow is shaped to fit the form of the human body; this is the part for the upper body, here is the part for the legs. Only this one small bit is meant for the head. Is everything clear?' With a friendly look he leant in the traveller's direction, eager and ready to launch into the most detailed explanations.

The traveller regarded the harrow with a ruffled brow. The disclosure concerning the legal proceedings did not satisfy him. Nevertheless he was obliged to remind himself that this was a penal colony, that exceptional measures were necessary here and that it was imperative to proceed in a military manner from beginning to end. He did, however, set some store in the new commandant who, clearly, albeit gradually, intended to institute a new set of procedures that did not sink into the limited mind of this officer. Following this train of thought, the traveller asked: 'Will the commandant attend the execution?'

'It is not certain,' said the officer, unsettled by the sudden question, his friendly expression twisting into a grimace, 'which is precisely why we have to get a move on. As much as I regret to do so, I will even have to cut my explanations short. But I would be happy to elaborate with more detailed explanations tomorrow, once the apparatus has been cleaned – the fact that it gets so filthy is its only failing. When the man is laid on the bed and it begins to tremble, the harrow sinks down to the body. It automatically adjusts itself such that the spikes just graze the body's

surface; once the adjustment is complete, this steel cable immediately tightens into a bar. And now the game begins. A person not privy to the workings of the device will notice no external difference in the punishment. The harrow appears to have a uniform functioning. Trembling, it sinks its spikes into the body, while the body itself, moreover, trembles along with the bed. In order to permit all present to supervise the dispensation of judgment, the harrow was made of glass. Embedding the needles in the glass did entail some technical difficulties, but we finally pulled it off after numerous attempts. No effort, I may add, was spared in the process. Now everyone can witness through the glass as the sentence is inscribed in the body. Don't you want to come closer and have a good look at the needles?'

The traveller rose slowly from his chair, stepped forward and bent over the harrow. 'You see,' said the officer, 'there are two kinds of needles in various arrangements. Every long one has a short one next to it. The long needle inscribes, and the short one squirts water to wash away the blood and preserve the clarity of the letters. The bloody water is then directed here to little ducts, from which it flows into the principal pipe, thence draining off into the pit.' The officer pointed out with his finger the precise path of the bloody water. When, to make it as clear as possible, he actually caught up the spout of the drainage pipe in his two hands, the traveller raised his head and, reaching behind him with his hand, wanted to return to his chair. Whereupon he noticed with a start that, like him, the condemned man had also followed the officer's invitation to take a closer look at the mechanism of the harrow. He had dragged the drowsy soldier a few paces forward by the chain and leant over the glass. One could see how, with an uncertain gaze, he sought out what the other two men had been looking at, but for want of explanations, failed to find it. He leant first in this direction, then in that. Again and again his gaze ran over the glass. The traveller wanted to make him stop it, as his actions were probably punishable. But the officer held back the traveller with one hand and with the other reached for a clod of earth from the mound and flung it at the soldier. The latter's eyes shot open, he saw what the condemned man had dared do and promptly dropped his rifle and, digging the heels of his boots into the ground, dragged the condemned back with a jerk so that the man fell down, and the soldier watched as he turned and rattled his chains. 'Stand him up!' the officer cried out, having noticed that the traveller was unduly distracted by the sight of the condemned. The traveller even went so far as to turn his back to the harrow, in which he appeared to have lost interest, just to establish what was happening to the condemned. 'Take good care of him!' the officer cried out again. Bounding around the apparatus, he himself grabbed the condemned under his armpits, and since the man kept slipping, with the soldier's aid he propped him upright.

'So now I know it all,' the traveller remarked, as the officer walked back to him.

'All except the most important part,' the officer replied, grabbed the traveller by the arm and pointed upwards. 'There inside the inscriber is the clockwork that directs the motion of the harrow, and this clockwork is set according to the diagram prescribed by the sentence. I still use the diagrams prepared by the former commandant. Here they are' – he pulled several sheets of paper from the leather étui

– ‘unfortunately I can’t let you touch them, they are my most precious possessions. If you’ll be seated I’ll show them to you from a distance, then you’ll be able to see everything clearly.’ He held up the first sheet. The traveller would have liked to say something appreciative, but all he saw were labyrinthine, repeatedly criss-crossing lines that so densely covered the page that one had to strain one’s eyes to see the white space in between. ‘Read it,’ said the officer. ‘I can’t,’ said the traveller. ‘But it’s clear enough,’ said the officer.

‘It is very artful,’ said the traveller evasively, ‘but I am unable to decipher it.’

‘Indeed,’ said the officer, laughed and returned the étui to his pocket, ‘it’s no calligraphy for schoolchildren. It takes time to decipher. You, too, would surely recognize it. It cannot, of course, be a simple script; it mustn’t kill immediately, but rather, on average, after a period of twelve hours or so; the turning point is geared to set in at the sixth hour. The actual script has to be enveloped by countless calligraphic flourishes; the script itself only traces a narrow belt around the waist; the rest of the body is intended for ornamentation. Can you now appreciate the harrow and the complexity of the entire apparatus? Look here!’ He clambered up the ladder, turned a wheel and called down: ‘Watch out, step to the side!’ And everything was set in motion. It would have been a perfect wonder, had the wheel not screeched. As if taken by surprise, the officer threatened the annoying wheel with a raised fist, shrugged, raised his arms apologetically to the traveller and climbed down to appreciate the functioning of the apparatus from below. But something else was amiss which he alone noticed; he climbed back up the ladder again, reached with both his hands into the inner workings of the inscriber, then, instead of using the ladder, slid down a bar so as to descend more quickly, and yelled with the greatest urgency into the traveller’s ear so as to make his words intelligible above the mechanical racket: ‘Can you grasp the procedure? The harrow starts writing; once it’s done with the first instalment of the sentence on the man’s back, the felt layer turns and slowly rolls the body on its side, so as to provide the harrow with a free surface. In the meantime the raw written parts are dabbed with cotton, infused with a special preparative which immediately stops the bleeding, in anticipation of deeper inscriptions. Here then, as the body keeps turning, the teeth at the rim of the harrow tear the felt from the wounds, toss it into the pit, and the harrow gets back to work. In this way it inscribes the sentence deeper and deeper over the twelve-hour period. For the first six hours the condemned lives almost as before, he only suffers pain. After two hours the wad is removed from the man’s mouth as he is now too weak to scream. Here in this electrically heated porringer at the head side a rice pap is placed, from which, if the man wants, he can partake, snatching it up with his tongue. None of them miss the chance. I can’t recall a single one, and I’ve been at it a long time. It’s only at the sixth hour that he loses the will to eat. At which point I generally kneel down here to observe this manifestation of his state. The man seldom swallows the last gulp, he just turns it around in his mouth and spits it out into the pit. I have to duck or else I get it in the face. But oh how silent he suddenly becomes at that sixth hour! The dumbest of them begin to get it. Understanding first radiates around the eyes. From here it spreads elsewhere.

It's a sight that could seduce one to want to lay oneself down along with him under the harrow. Nothing more happens, the man just begins to decipher the script, he purses his lips as if to listen. You saw for yourself, it is not easy to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. It does, of course, demand considerable effort; it takes him six hours fully to comprehend the sentence. At which point, however, the harrow pierces him all the way through and drops him into the pit, where he lands in the bloody water and cotton. Justice has now been carried out, and we, the soldier and I, scrape up his remains.'

The traveller turned an ear towards the officer, and with his hands in his jacket pocket, watched the work of the machine. The condemned man watched it too, but without grasping its purpose. He leant forward a little and followed the motion of the oscillating needles, when, at a signal from the officer, the soldier, knife in hand, sliced through his shirt and trousers from the rear so that they fell from the condemned man's body; he wanted to grab after the falling stuff to cover his nakedness, but the soldier lifted him in the air and shook off the remaining rags. The officer set the machine, and in the ensuing silence the condemned man was laid under the harrow. The chains unshackled, he was bound with straps instead; for the condemned man it almost seemed at first like a relief. And then the harrow sank a little lower, for he was a slender man. When the points made contact, a shudder spread across his skin; while the soldier was busy with his right hand, he stretched out his left without knowing whereto; it happened to be where the traveller stood. The officer kept a constant eye on the traveller, as if eager to read from his face the impression the execution, which he had at least explained in a summary fashion, made on him.

The strap intended to immobilize the condemned man's hands tore open; the soldier had probably fastened it too tightly. The soldier indicated the torn strap to the officer, hoping for his help. The officer did indeed step towards him, with his face turned to the traveller: 'The apparatus is quite complicated, something is bound to tear or break here and there; but don't be fooled by such minor flaws. The leather strap can, by the way, immediately be replaced; I'll just use a chain; which will, however, diminish the gentleness of the swing for the right arm.' And while attaching the chain, he added: 'The means made available for the upkeep of the device are now exceedingly limited. Under the former commandant I had free access to funds expressly committed for this purpose. There was a storehouse here in the colony where you could find every imaginable replacement part. I confess that I was almost extravagant in my upkeep, before I mean, not now, as the new commandant maintains, for whom every critique is just an excuse to do away with old-established customs. He now oversees the machine's budget himself, and if I order a new strap he demands to see the old torn one as proof, and the new one takes ten days to arrive, is of a poor quality and doesn't hold up for long. But nobody gives a damn how, in the meantime, I am supposed to keep the apparatus running without straps.'

The traveller thought to himself: it is always a ticklish matter to intercede decisively in a foreign context. He was neither a resident of the penal colony nor of

the country to which it belonged. If he wished to judge or even thwart this execution, the locals could well reply: you're a stranger, be still. To which he would have been able to make no ready reply, but merely have added that, in this instance, he did not rightly understand himself, for his only purpose in travelling was to witness, and by no means to alter, the conduct of foreign judicial systems. But things were indeed quite different here, practically begging to be put right. There was no doubt as to the injustice of the legal proceedings and of the inhumanity of the mode of execution. No one could possibly presume any selfish purpose on the part of the traveller, since the condemned man was a perfect stranger, no countryman of his, and definitely not someone who elicited his pity. The traveller himself had come on the recommendation of high officials, been most courteously received here, and the fact that he had been invited to attend this execution appeared, moreover, to indicate that his judgement was sought concerning the conduct of these proceedings. This was all the more likely since the commandant, as he had just been told in no uncertain terms, was no proponent of the procedure and had an almost hostile rapport with the officer.

Then the traveller heard the officer cry out in anger. He had just managed, not without difficulty, to shove the felt wad into the condemned man's mouth, when the latter shut his eyes and, giving way to an overpowering urge to regurgitate, proceeded to retch. The officer rushed to tear his head loose and turn it downwards to the pit; but it was too late, the vomit had already spilt all over the machine. 'It's all the commandant's fault!' the officer screamed and rattled the brass bars in a mindless rage. 'My machine will now be soiled like a pigsty.' With trembling hands he pointed it out to the traveller. 'Did I not spend hours trying to make the commandant comprehend that no more food was to be given a day before the execution! But the new relaxed regulations are of a different mind. The commandant's ladies stuff the man's throat with sweet things before he is led off. His whole life he's been fed with stinking fish and now he has to eat sweets! But all right, so be it, I would not have objected, but why in heaven's name can't they fetch me the new felt wad I've been begging for these last three months? How can anyone take this filthy thing into the mouth without gagging, a wad on which more than a hundred men sucked and gnawed while dying?'

The condemned man lowered his head and looked peaceful, the soldier was busy wiping the machine off with the man's cast-off shirt. The officer walked over to the traveller, who, sensing something, stepped back, but the officer grasped him by the hand and pulled him to his side. 'I would like to have a few words with you in confidence,' he said, 'if it's all right with you.'

'Of course,' said the traveller and listened with his eyes turned to the ground.

'This procedure and this execution, which you now have occasion to witness, is presently no longer favoured by any persons in this colony. I am its sole proponent and the last living representative of all that the former commandant left us. I can no longer conceive of any further development of this procedure, all my efforts are devoted to preserving what's left. In the old commandant's lifetime the colony was entirely staffed by his followers; I am endowed in part with the commandant's

power of persuasion but am altogether lacking in his authority; consequently these followers have taken a low profile, many are still around but none of them will admit it. If nowadays on an execution day you ventured into a café and listened around, you might perhaps hear nothing but equivocal remarks. They're all old followers, but given the newfangled notions of the current commandant, these men are of little use to me. And so I ask you, sir: should such a life's work' – he pointed to the machine – 'be brought to rack and ruin all on account of this commandant and the ladies that lead him around by the nose? Can one permit such a thing? Even if, as a stranger, one spends only a few days on our island? But there's no time to be lost, preparations are in motion to undermine my juridical authority; deliberations are already under way in the commandant's headquarters in which I am not included; even your visit today seems to me to be characteristic of the entire situation; cowards, they send a lone stranger to bear witness. What were executions like in the old days! I'll tell you. The day before the execution the entire valley was already teeming with people; everyone came to have a look; in the early morning the commandant appeared with his womenfolk; bugles resounded, awakening one and all; I made the announcement that everything was ready; the entire community – not a single official was absent – gathered in rows around the machine; this heap of cane chairs is a miserable leftover of those days. The machine glistened, freshly polished, for almost every execution I replaced faulty components with brand-new spare parts. Before hundreds of admiring eyes – every spectator stood on tiptoe all the way back to yonder cliffs – the condemned man was placed by the commandant himself under the harrow. Back then it was my solemn duty and my distinct honour, as presiding officer of these juridical proceedings, to carry out the preparatory tasks an ordinary enlisted man does without thinking today. And then began the execution itself! Not a discordant note disturbed the smooth functioning of the machine. Some of the spectators stopped watching but just lay there with their eyes shut in the sand; everyone knew: justice is now being carried out. In the silence the only sound you could hear was the moaning of the condemned man muffled by the wad in his mouth. Today the device is no longer able to press a deeper moan from the condemned than the wad can stifle; but back then a caustic fluid dripped from the inscribing needles, a fluid no longer available. Yes, and then came the sixth hour! It was impossible to grant everyone's request to look on from up close. The commandant, in his wisdom, ordered that special consideration should be taken for the children; I, of course, in my official capacity, always stood by; oftentimes I would be crouching there with two little ones in my right arm and two in my left. Oh how we took in every look of transfiguration from that martyred face, oh how we kept our eyes peeled in anticipation of the appearance of that finally achieved and already fleeting state of justice! Oh what times they were, old chum!' The officer had clearly forgotten who was standing there before him; he embraced the traveller and laid his head on his shoulder. Exceedingly ill at ease, the traveller peered past the officer. The soldier had finished cleaning the apparatus and now poured some more rice pap from a tin into the porringer. No sooner did the condemned man, who appeared to have completely recuperated, notice this, than he

began lapping at the pap with his tongue. The soldier shoved him away again, since the pap was intended for a later time, but it was in any case an unseemly sight to see the soldier dig in with his filthy fingers and filch food out from under the condemned man's ravenous tongue.

The officer quickly got a grip on himself. 'I did not mean to actually reach out to you,' he said, 'I know, it's impossible today to make you fathom what those times were like. In any case, the machine still works. It keeps on performing its function even if there's no one left to appreciate it here in this godforsaken valley. And once it's done, the corpse still drops in an inconceivably smooth slide down into the ditch, even if, unlike in the past, hundreds are no longer gathered around like flies to watch. Back then we had to install a stout railing around the ditch, but it has long since been torn down.'

The traveller wanted to turn his face away from the officer and peered into the void. The officer thought he was taking in the desolation of the valley; so he grabbed hold of the traveller's hands, turned himself around to fathom the meaning of his looks, and asked: 'Do you grasp the scandal of it all?'

But the traveller remained silent. The officer let him be a little while; with legs spread wide apart, and hands on his hips, he stood still and stared at the ground. Then he smiled at the traveller with a hint of encouragement and said: 'I happened to be standing near you yesterday when the commandant extended an invitation. I heard the invitation. I know the commandant. I immediately understood his motive. Even though his authority is surely great enough for him to proceed against me, he does not yet dare do so, but he would rather subject me to the judgment of a distinguished stranger, namely yours. His calculation is precisely reasoned; you've only been on the island for two days; you did not know the old commandant and his way of thinking; you are enmeshed in European attitudes; perhaps you are a convinced opponent of the death penalty, in general, and of such a mechanized method of execution, in particular; you see, furthermore, how the execution is conducted sadly, without any public participation, and with an already somewhat damaged device. Given all of the above, would it not then be likely to conclude (in the commandant's view) that you do not approve of these proceedings? And if indeed you do not approve (I'm still presenting the commandant's supposition) you would certainly not keep this opinion to yourself, since you surely trust your time-tested convictions. You have indeed had occasion to see first-hand and so come to respect many of the peculiarities of many peoples, and you will, therefore, probably not speak quite as vehemently against these proceedings as you might in your native land. But the commandant does not require your absolute condemnation. A fleeting, careless remark will suffice. It does not even need to be what you really think, just as long as it appears to concur with his position. He will slyly sound you out, of that I am quite certain. And his womenfolk will sit around pricking up their ears; you will say something like: "Trials are run differently in my country", or "In my country, the accused is cross-examined before the verdict", or "In my country, the condemned man is informed of the verdict", or "In my country, there are other punishments than the death penalty", or "In my country torture ended with the

Middle Ages." All these are observations that are perfectly valid in so far as they appear to you to be self-evident, harmless observations that have no bearing on my business. But how will the commandant interpret them? I can already see him, the good commandant, immediately shoving his chair aside and hastening out onto the balcony; I can see his womenfolk rushing after him; I can hear his voice – the ladies call it his thunder voice – so, and he says: "A great investigator of the Western World assigned to appraise the legal proceedings in all lands has just declared that our proceedings are outmoded and inhumane. In light of this judgment by such a distinguished person, it is no longer possible for me to tolerate such actions. As of today, I hereby ordain, etc." You wish to intercede, the way he put it is not what you said, you did not call my method inhumane; quite the contrary, in your considered opinion you hold it to be the most humane method worthy of a human subject, you also admire the machinery – but it's too late; you can't even make it to the balcony, which is already full of womenfolk; you want to call attention to yourself; you want to scream; but a female hand covers your mouth – and the work of the former commandant and me is lost.'

The traveller had to suppress a smile; the task he'd thought to be so difficult had turned out to be so simple. He replied evasively: 'You overestimate my influence; the commandant read my letter of introduction, he knows that I'm no expert in juridical procedures. Were I to express an opinion it would be that of a private citizen, which would carry no more weight than the views of countless others, and would, in any case, be far more insignificant than the position of the commandant himself, who, so it seems, has very extensive powers in this prison colony. If his view of this procedure is indeed as firmly established as you believe, then, I fear, the end of this procedure is near at hand, without any need of my modest mediation.'

Did the officer already fathom the way things stood? No, he did not. He emphatically shook his head, cast a quick look back at the condemned man and the soldier, who flinched and stopped eating, whereupon the officer stepped up close to the traveller, looked at him, not in the face, but somewhere on the surface of his coat, and whispered more quietly than before: 'You do not know the commandant; you stand before him and before us all – forgive the expression – as a harmless spectator; but your influence, believe me, carries immeasurable weight. I was indeed delighted when I heard that you would attend the execution by yourself. This order by the commandant was supposed to put me in my place, but I prefer to turn it to my advantage. Undistracted by insidious suggestions and disdainful looks – which you would not have been able to avoid had there been more people on hand to witness the execution – you listened to my explanations, saw the machine and are now in the process of observing the execution. You have undoubtedly already made your assessment; should you still harbour any slight uncertainties, the sight of the execution will clear them. And now I ask you: please help me bolster my position with the commandant!'

The traveller interrupted. 'How in heaven's name could I do that,' he cried out, 'that's completely impossible. I can no less help you than hamper your cause.'

‘You *can*,’ said the officer. The traveller noticed with some trepidation that the officer balled his fists. ‘You can indeed,’ the officer repeated with all the more urgency. ‘I have a plan that’s bound to succeed. You think your influence does not suffice. I know that it does. But supposing you’re right, is it not imperative to try everything possible, even the possibly superfluous, to preserve the procedure? Please listen to my plan. Its realization depends above all on your withholding judgment today in conversations in the colony. If not asked directly you must express no opinion; what you do let slip, however, should be short and vague; it should be apparent that you find it difficult to talk about, that you are sullen, that should you speak openly, you break out in imprecations. I am not asking you to lie; not at all; you should merely keep it short, something to the effect that: “Yes, I witnessed the execution,” or “Yes, I listened to all they had to say.” Just that, nothing more. It’s enough that they should sense your sullen response, albeit not in the commandant’s favour. He will, of course, completely misconstrue your response in support of his position. That is the basis of my plan. Tomorrow there will be an important meeting of all high-ranking administrative personnel in the commandant’s headquarters under his direction. The commandant naturally managed to turn all such meetings into showcases for his cause. A gallery was built, which is invariably full of spectators. I am compelled to take part, even if seething with disgust. You will undoubtedly be invited to attend; if you comport yourself today true to my plan, the invitation will become an urgent request. But if for some inconceivable reason you should not be invited you absolutely must request the invitation; there is no doubt that it will then be forthcoming. Then you will be seated tomorrow with the ladies in the loge. He will confirm with frequent upward glances that you are there. After running through several anodyne, ridiculous subjects of discussion solely of interest to those in the gallery – usually relating to harbour improvements, always harbour improvements – he finally comes to the matter of judicial proceedings. If the commandant doesn’t get to it, or takes too long to get to it, I will take it upon myself to do so. I will stand up and report on today’s execution. Very briefly, just for the record. Such reports are not the norm here, but I nevertheless go through the motions. The commandant will thank me, as always, with a cheerful smile, and then, unable to resist, he will seize the moment. “We have just heard,” or with some such words he will begin, “the report concerning the execution. I would like to add to this report that the great investigator, by whose visit, as you all know, the colony is so extraordinarily honoured, was present at this particular execution. The significance of today’s session is likewise enhanced by his presence. Should we not then ask this great investigator for his assessment of the old-fashioned execution and the legal proceedings that led up to it?” His words will naturally elicit a burst of applause indicating unanimous agreement, my own being the loudest. The commandant will nod respectfully in your direction and say: “Then, on behalf of all of us in the colony, I ask you to respond to the question.” Whereupon you will step to the balustrade. You will lay your hands on it for all to see, lest the women seize hold of them and play with your fingers. And now at last it is your turn to speak. I don’t know how I will endure the hours of tense

anticipation until then. You need not mince your words, just let the truth ring out, lean over the railing, go ahead and shout out your reply, assail the commandant with your opinion, your unflinching position. Or perhaps you'd rather not be so strident, it's not your way, or not the way things are done in your country in such situations; that's quite all right, do as you see fit, don't even get up, just say a few words, mumble them just loud enough so that the officials below you can hear, that's fine, you don't even have to touch upon the meagre attendance at the execution, the screeching cog, the torn strap, the filthy wad – you can leave all that to me, and believe me, if my words don't make him leave the room, they will bring him to his knees, compel him to admit: old commandant, I bow to you. That is my plan; will you help me carry it out? But of course you will, indeed you must.' And the officer grabbed the traveller by both arms and, taking deep breaths, looked him in the eye. The last lines he howled so loudly that even the soldier and the condemned man looked up; and even though they could not possibly understand, they stopped eating and peered, mid-chew, at the traveller.

The answer he had to give was clear to the traveller from the start; he had seen too much in his life to waver now; fundamentally honest, he was fearless. Nevertheless he hesitated for a heartbeat at the sight of the soldier and the condemned man. But finally he said what he had to say: 'No.' The officer blinked several times but never took his eyes off him. 'Would you like an explanation?' the traveller asked. The officer nodded in silence. 'I am an opponent of this procedure,' the traveller said. 'Even before you took me into your confidence – which, needless to say, I will always respect – I already asked myself if I had the right to oppose the procedure and if my opposition had the slightest chance of succeeding. It was clear to me to whom I had to address myself: to the commandant, of course. You made my course all the clearer to me without, however, affecting my decision; quite the contrary, your honest conviction moved me deeply, though it did not alter my position.'

Struck dumb, the officer turned to the device and picked up a brass bar, whereupon he peered upwards at the inscriber, as if to check that everything was running smoothly. The soldier and the condemned man appeared to have established a bond; as difficult as it was, given his bondage, the condemned man signalled the soldier; the soldier bent forward; the condemned man whispered something, and the soldier nodded.

The traveller followed the officer and said: 'You don't yet know my intentions. I will indeed present my position regarding the procedure to the commandant, though not at an official gathering, but rather in private; but I won't stick around here long enough to have to attend a meeting; I plan to sail off tomorrow morning, or at least book my passage.'

It did not appear as if the officer had paid attention to his words. 'So the procedure did not convince you,' he said, as if to himself, and smiled the way a grown-up smiles at the foolishness of a child, hiding his own thoughts in the shroud of the smile. 'Then it's time,' he said at last, and looked the traveller full in the face with a resolve that precluded any summons to action, any call for response.

‘Time for what?’ the traveller asked, somewhat alarmed, but received no answer.

‘You are free,’ the officer said to the condemned man in his native tongue. The latter could not at first believe it. ‘Free you are,’ said the officer. For the first time the face of the condemned became truly animated. Could it be true? Or was it just a whim that would pass? Had the foreign traveller arranged for a pardon? What was it? This is what his facial expression seemed to be saying. But not for long. Whatever the case may be, he wanted, if permitted, to be really truly free and he began to twist and turn, as much as the harrow permitted.

‘You’re going to tear my straps,’ cried the officer, ‘be still! We’ll undo them.’ And he and the soldier, whom he signalled, got to it. The condemned man gave off a quiet wordless laugh, first turning his face to the left to smile at the officer, then to the right, grinning at the soldier, nor did he forget the traveller.

‘Pull him out!’ the officer ordered the soldier. Certain precautions had to be taken on account of the harrow. In his haste the condemned man had already fetched himself a few laceration wounds on his back.

But from now on the officer hardly paid him any attention. He approached the traveller, once again pulled out the small leather étui, leafed through its contents, finally found the page he was looking for and held it up for the traveller to see. ‘Read it,’ he said.

‘I can’t,’ said the traveller, ‘I already told you I couldn’t decipher these pages.’

‘Just take a closer look,’ said the officer and stepped beside the traveller to read along with him. And when that didn’t help he raised his little finger in the air over the paper, as if the page were too precious to be touched, so as thereby to facilitate the traveller’s reading. Whereupon the traveller took pains to try and read it, at the very least to please the officer, but his efforts proved to no avail. Now the officer began to spell out the title and then read it aloud again in context. ‘ “Be just!” it says,’ the officer said, ‘now you can read it for yourself.’ The traveller bent so low over the paper that the officer, fearing he might touch it, pulled it away; to which the traveller said nothing, but it was clear that he was not able to decipher it. ‘ “Be just!” it says,’ the officer repeated.

‘No doubt,’ said the traveller, ‘I believe you that that’s what it says.’

‘Very well then,’ said the officer, at least somewhat satisfied, and, with the paper in hand, climbed the ladder; he carefully rested the sheet on the inscriber, and seemed to completely alter the setting; it was a very laborious task, probably involving minuscule cogs; sometimes the officer’s head disappeared altogether inside the inscriber, that’s how closely he had to inspect the clockwork.

Following his progress from below, the traveller’s neck grew stiff and his eyes hurt from peering into the sun-drenched sky. The soldier and the condemned man paid them no heed, completely wrapped up in each other as they were. With the tip of a bayonet, the soldier plucked up the condemned man’s shirt and trousers from the pit where they lay. The shirt was filthy, and the condemned man rinsed it in the water bucket. And when then he pulled on shirt and trousers, the soldier had to laugh along with him, as the pieces of clothing were both torn in two. Perhaps the condemned man felt duty-bound to amuse the soldier; he spun around before him in

his torn clothes, while the latter crouched on the ground and, laughing, slapped his knees. Even so they took pains to comport themselves properly in the presence of the two gentlemen.

When the officer was finally done up there, smiling, he surveyed the machine with all its parts, shut the cover of the inscriber which had hitherto been open, climbed down, peered into the pit and then at the condemned man, seemed satisfied that the latter had fished out his clothing, and then went to the water bucket to wash his hands, realized too late how awfully filthy the water was, seemed disappointed at not being able to wash his hands, finally did dip them – this ersatz did not satisfy him, but he had no other recourse – in the sand, then he stood up and began to unbutton the jacket of his uniform. In the process the two ladies' handkerchiefs that he had pressed behind the collar fell out. 'Here, take your handkerchiefs,' he said and flung them at the condemned man. 'Gifts from the ladies,' he explained, addressing the traveller.

Despite the obvious haste with which he removed his uniform jacket and subsequently stripped himself naked, he nevertheless handled each piece of clothing with great care, going so far as to stroke the silver aiguillette on his tunic to straighten out a tassel. In striking contrast to this painstaking care, as soon as he was done with a particular piece of clothing he immediately flung it with an involuntary shrug into the pit. The last thing left was his short dagger with the strap. He pulled the dagger out of the sheath, broke it in two, then gathered everything together, the dagger halves, the sheath and the strap and flung them with such force into the pit that the parts rattled below.

Then he stood there stark naked. The traveller bit his lip and said nothing. He full well knew what would follow, but he had no right to stand in the officer's way. If the legal proceedings to which the officer was so attached were indeed so close to being annulled – possibly as a consequence of the traveller's intercession, for which the latter, in turn, felt responsible – then the officer was now doing precisely what he had to do; the traveller, in his place, would have done no differently.

The soldier and the condemned man initially understood nothing; at first they did not even pay attention. The condemned man was delighted to have retrieved the handkerchiefs, but he wasn't able to enjoy them for long as the soldier swiped them away with a swift, unforeseeable grab. Whereupon the condemned man attempted to slip them out of the back of the soldier's belt, where the latter had tucked them, but the soldier was vigilant. So they jostled, half in jest. It was only when the officer stood there stark naked that they took notice. The condemned man, in particular, seemed to have been struck by the presentiment of some momentous swing of the pendulum of justice. What happened to him would now happen to the officer. Maybe it would swing all the way. It was probably the foreign traveller who gave the order. So he perceived it as getting even. Without having suffered to the bitter end he would nevertheless enjoy complete retribution. A broad, silent laugh spread across his face and stayed there.

But the officer meanwhile turned to the machine. If before it had already been perfectly apparent how well he understood its modus operandi, one was now

practically struck dumb by the bond between man and machine, and how blindly it obeyed. He only had to near the harrow with his hand and it already rose and fell several times before arriving at the right height to receive him; he only grazed the rim of the bed and it already began vibrating; the cotton wad swung towards his mouth – one could tell that the officer, in fact, didn't want it, but his hesitation only lasted a moment before he obeyed and took it into his mouth. All was ready; only the straps still hung open on either side, but they were obviously unnecessary, the officer did not need to be strapped down. The condemned man noticed the hanging straps – in his view the execution could not be complete if the straps were unfastened; he gestured excitedly to the soldier and the two leapt forward to strap the officer in. The latter had already stretched out one foot to hit the handle to set the inscriber in motion; then he saw them coming; so he pulled his foot back and let himself be strapped in. But now he could no longer reach the handle; neither the soldier nor the condemned man would find it, and the traveller resolved not to budge. It was not necessary; no sooner were the straps fastened than the machine kicked in; the bed vibrated, the needles danced over his skin, the harrow swayed back and forth. The traveller had already been watching a while before he remembered that a cog in the inscriber should have screeched; but everything was silent, not the slightest hum could be heard.

Its silent operation practically made the device elude notice. The traveller glanced over at the soldier and the condemned man. The latter was the livelier of the two; every aspect of the machine intrigued him, as he alternately bent down and stood on tiptoe, with his index finger all the while outstretched, pointing out something to the soldier. The traveller found it hard to take. He was determined to stay to the bitter end, but the sight of the two carrying on as they did was intolerable. 'Go home,' he said. The soldier might well have been inclined to do so, but the condemned man took the order as a kind of punishment. He pleaded with folded hands to be allowed to stay, and when, shaking his head, the traveller still refused, the condemned man went down on his knees. Fathoming that orders were of no avail, the traveller wanted to go over and chase them away. Whereupon he heard a strange sound coming from the inscriber and looked up. Was that faulty cog acting up after all? No, it was something else altogether. Slowly the inscriber lid lifted and then opened completely. The teeth of a cogwheel reared up and revealed its metallic intent. Soon the entire trundle emerged, and it was as if some powerful force pressed down on the inscriber so that there was no room left for this orphaned wheel that whirled out to the rim of the inscriber, dropped down and rolled upright in the sand, before falling over. But already another cogwheel flashed its teeth, and others followed, big wheels, small wheels, the one largely indistinguishable from the other, and the same thing happened to each; and time and again, when it seemed as if the inscriber had spat out its last, yet another particularly profuse series of parts reared up, dropped down, rolled and fell flat in the sand. This spectacle made the condemned man completely forget the traveller's order; so entranced was he that he wanted to touch every expelled part, at the same time egging the soldier on to help, but always pulling back his hand in initial terror when yet another cog came flying after it.

The traveller, on the other hand, was deeply disturbed; the machine was clearly self-destructing, its smooth functioning being an illusion; it seemed to him as if he had to act on behalf of the officer, as the latter could no longer call the shots. But since the fall of the cogwheels had consumed his entire attention, he had failed to pay attention to the rest of the machine; and now that the inscriber had spat out the last cogwheel and he finally bent over the harrow, the traveller had another, more worrisome surprise. The harrow did not write, but simply pricked, and the bed failed to roll the body, but, merely vibrating, lifted it into the path of the needles. The traveller wanted to intercede, if possible to bring the entire mechanism to a halt – this was no instructive torture as the officer conceived it, but plain ordinary murder. He stretched out his hand. But the harrow had already lifted the skewered body to the side, as it was only supposed to do at the twelfth hour. The blood flowed in a hundred streams (undiluted with water, since the water spigots had once again failed to function). And now the last part malfunctioned too: though bleeding profusely, the body would not disengage from the long needles, and just hung over the pit without falling. The harrow sought to return to its original position, but since the mechanism registered that it was not yet relieved of its load it remained hanging over the pit. ‘For heaven’s sake, help!’ the traveller cried out to the soldier and the condemned man, himself grabbing hold of the officer’s feet. He wanted to tug at the feet, have the two grab the officer’s head on the other side, and so to lift him slowly from the needles. But the two could not get it together to act; the condemned man went so far as to turn his back; the traveller had to go over and nudge them towards the officer’s head. Whereupon, almost against his will, he saw the face of the corpse. It was as it had been in life (with no sign of the promised salvation); what all the others were supposed to have found in the machine the officer did not find; his lips were pressed tightly together, his eyes were open with the expression of life, his look was quiet and determined, the tip of the great iron spike pierced his forehead.

When the traveller came to the first houses of the colony, with the soldier and the condemned man walking behind him, the soldier pointed to one structure and said: ‘Here’s the café.’ On the ground floor was a deep, low-ceilinged, cave-like room, its walls and rafters blackened with smoke. Its entire width was open facing the street. Even though the café differed little from the other houses in the colony, all of which, except for the commandant’s complex, were rather run-down, it nevertheless evoked for the traveller an historic aura and he felt the might of former times. He came closer and, with his two companions following behind, stepped between the unoccupied tables that stood outside lining the street, and inhaled the cool, musty air that wafted from within. ‘The old man’s buried here,’ said the soldier, ‘the priest refused to let him have a plot in the cemetery. They were undecided for a while where to put him, finally they buried him here. I bet the officer didn’t tell you that, it wasn’t exactly something he was proud of. He tried several times at night to dig the old man up, but every time they chased him away.’

‘Where is the grave?’ asked the traveller, who couldn’t believe his ears.

Whereupon the two, the soldier and the condemned man, ran forward and pointed to the spot with outstretched hands. They led the traveller to the rear wall, where, at several tables, customers sat talking. They were probably dockworkers, muscular men with short, shiny, black beards. None wore coats, their shirts were torn, they were poor, humble folk. When the traveller approached a few got up, pressed themselves against the wall and stared. ‘It’s a stranger,’ the word went around in a whisper, ‘he wants to see the grave.’

They shoved aside one of the tables, beneath which there really was a tombstone. It was a simple stone, small enough to be hidden under a table. It bore an inscription with such minuscule letters the traveller had to kneel down to read it. It read: ‘Here rests the old commandant. His followers, who now have no name, dug the grave and set the stone. There is a prophecy that in a few years’ time the commandant will rise again and from this humble house lead his followers to take back the colony. Believe and wait!’ Once the traveller had finished reading this and got up again he saw the men standing around him and smiling, as though they had read the inscription along with him, found it ridiculous and pressed him to share their opinion. The traveller pretended not to notice, distributed a few coins, waited till the table was pushed back over the grave, left the café and went to the harbour.

The soldier and the condemned man met acquaintances who held them back with idle chatter. But they must soon have said their goodbyes, since the traveller had only reached the middle of the long stairway leading down to the landing boats when he noticed them running after him. They probably wanted to persuade him at the last minute to take them along. And while the traveller bargained with a boatman over the price to row him out to the steamer, the two went stumbling down the steps in silence, as they didn’t dare scream. But once they reached the dock the traveller was already seated in the rowing boat and the boatman was just pulling off. They could still have leapt in, but the traveller picked up and threatened them with a thick mooring rope, and thereby kept them from jumping.

The Kiss

1913

Robert Walser

What wondrous thing have I dreamt? What befell me? What curious visitation came upon me suddenly last night, lightning-like from on high as I lay here lost in sleep? Suspecting nothing and wanting nothing and completely unconscious, a slave of sleep, that held me locked in its dark limbo, I lay there unprotected and unarmed, without expectations and without responsibilities (for we are wholly irresponsible in sleep), when that beautiful and horrible, that great and sweet, that kind and awful, that entrancing and terrifying thing came upon me, as though wanting to suffocate me with its crush and kiss. Sleep has inner eyes, and so I must confess that I saw the thing that struck me with a sort of second or alternate set of eyes. I saw it fly with the speed of wind and lightning, slicing through the infinity of space, shooting down from the immeasurably vast and distant heights to my mouth. I saw it and was horrified, and yet I could not budge or resist. I even heard it approaching. I heard it. I saw and heard that never before seen and never before experienced kiss which cannot be described with words, just as our language has no words to describe the shudder and delight that shook me. The kiss of dreams has nothing in common with the gentle, soft, mutually willed and desired kiss that lovers share. It was not a mouth that kissed me, no, it was a solitary and free-flying kiss. A kiss that was completely and absolutely pure kiss and nothing else. Something autonomous, spectral, like the soul. And once struck by that comprehensible and then again completely incomprehensible thing, I was already dissolving in such an all-consuming – I would like to say, grandiose – rapture which I dare not describe in any greater detail. Ah, that was a kiss, what a kiss! The pain it caused me forced me to give off a cry of distress, and at the very same instant I received that kiss with its heavenly and hellish effect, I woke up but could not for a long while thereafter get a grip on myself. What is a man, what is Man? What is the kiss I give gladly in broad daylight or in moonlight, in the sweet-satisfying lover's night under the trees or elsewhere, compared to the frenzy of that imagined-inflicted kiss, kissed by the demons?

The Blackbird

1935

Robert Musil

The two men whom I must mention in order to relate three little stories, in which the narrative pivots around the identity of the narrator, were friends from youth; let's call them Aone and Atwo. The fact is that such early friendships grow ever more astounding the older you get. You change over the years, from the crown of your head to the soles of your feet, from the skin's soft down to the depths of your heart; but, strangely enough, your relationship with each other stays the same, fluctuating about as little as the communion we each carry on with that diverse host of sirs successively addressed as *I*. It is beside the point whether or not you still identify with that little blond numbskull photographed once long ago; as a matter of fact, you can't really say for sure that you even like the little devil, that bundle of 'I'. And so, too, you may very well both disagree with and disapprove of your best friends; indeed, there are many friends who can't stand each other. And in a certain sense, those friendships are the deepest and the best, for, without any admixtures, they contain that indefinable essence in its purest form.

The youth that united the two friends Aone and Atwo was nothing less than religious in character. While both were brought up in an institution that prided itself on the proper emphasis it placed on the religious fundamentals, the pupils of that institution did their best to ignore those selfsame principles. The school chapel, for instance, was a real, big, beautiful church, complete with a stone steeple; it was reserved for the school's exclusive use. The absence of strangers proved a great boon, for while the bulk of the student body was busy according to the dictates of sacred custom, now kneeling, now rising at the pews up front, small groups could gather at the rear to play cards beside the confessional booths, or to smoke on the organ steps. And some escaped up to the steeple, whose pointed spire was ringed by a saucer-like balcony on the stone parapet of which, at a dizzying height, acrobatics were performed that could easily have cost the lives of far less sin-burdened boys than these.

One such provocation of the Lord involved a slow, muscle-straining elevation of the feet in mid-air while, with glance directed downwards, you grasped at the parapet, balancing precariously on your hands. Anyone who has ever tried this stunt on level ground will appreciate just how much confidence, bravery and luck are required to pull it off on a foot-wide stone strip up at the top of a tower. It must also be said that many wild and nimble boys, though virtuoso gymnasts on level ground, never did attempt it. Aone, for instance, never tried it. Atwo, on the other hand – and let this serve to introduce him as narrator – was, in his boyhood, the creator of

this test of character. It was hard to find another body like his. He didn't sport an athletic build like so many others, but seems to have developed muscles naturally, effortlessly. A narrow, smallish head sat atop his torso, with eyes like lightning bolts wrapped in velvet, and teeth that one would sooner have associated with the fierceness of a beast of prey than the serenity of a mystic.

Later, during their student days, the two friends professed a materialistic philosophy of life devoid of God or the soul, viewing man as a physiological or economic machine – which, in fact, he may very well be, though this wasn't the point as far as they were concerned – since the appeal of such a philosophy lies not in its inherent truth, but rather in its demonic, pessimistic, morbidly intellectual character. By this time their relationship had already become that special kind of friendship. And while Atwo studied forestry, and spoke of travelling as a forest ranger to the far reaches of Russia or Asia as soon as he was through with his studies, his friend Aone, who scorned such boyish aspirations, had by then settled on a more solid pursuit, and had at the time already cast his lot with the rising labour movement. And when they met again shortly before the Great War, Atwo already had his Russian adventure behind him. He spoke little about it, was now employed in the offices of some large corporation and seemed, despite the appearance of middle-class comfort, to have suffered considerable disappointments. His old friend had in the meantime left the class struggle and become editor of a newspaper that printed a great deal about social harmony and was owned by a stockbroker. Henceforth the two friends despised each other insuperably, but once again fell out of touch; and when they finally met again for a short while, Atwo told the following story the way one empties out a sack of memories for a friend, so as to be able to push on again with a clean bill of lading. It matters little under the circumstances how the other responded, and their exchange can perhaps best be related in the form of a monologue. It would be far more important to the fabric of the tale were it possible to describe exactly what Atwo looked like at the time (which is easier said than done), for this raw impression of the man is not without bearing on the gist of his words. Suffice it to say that he brought to mind a sharp, taut and narrow riding crop balanced on its soft tip, leaning up against the wall; it was in just such a half-erect, half-slouching posture that he seemed to feel most at ease.

Among the most extraordinary places in the world – said Atwo – are those Berlin courtyards where two, three or four buildings flash their rear ends at each other, and where, in square holes set in the middle of the walls, kitchen maids sit and sing. You can tell by the look of the red copper pots hung in the pantry how loud their clatter is. From far down below a man's voice bawls up at one of the girls, or heavy wooden shoes go clip-clop back and forth across the cobblestones. Slowly. Heavily. Incessantly. Senselessly. For ever. Isn't it so?

The kitchens and bedrooms look outwards and downwards on all this; they lie close together like love and digestion in the human anatomy. Floor upon floor, the conjugal beds are stacked up one on top of the other, since all the bedrooms occupy

the same space in each building – window wall, bathroom wall and closet wall prescribe the placement of each bed almost down to the half-yard. The dining rooms are likewise piled up floor on floor, as are the white-tiled baths and the balconies with their red awnings. Love, sleep, birth, digestion, unexpected reunions, troubled and restful nights are all vertically aligned in these buildings like the columns of sandwiches at a vending machine. In middle-class apartments like these your destiny is already waiting for you the moment you move in. You will admit that human freedom consists essentially of where and when we do what we do, for what we do is almost always the same – thus the sinister implications of one uniform blueprint for all. Once I climbed up on top of a cabinet just to make use of the vertical dimension, and I can assure you that the unpleasant conversation in which I was involved looked altogether different from that vantage point.

Atwo laughed at the memory and poured himself a drink; Aone thought about how they were at that very moment seated on a balcony with a red awning that belonged to his apartment, but he said nothing, knowing all too well what he might have remarked.

I am still perfectly willing to admit today, by the way – Atwo added of his own accord – that there is something awe-inspiring about such uniformity. And in the past this sense of vastness, of a wasteland, brought to mind a desert or an ocean; a Chicago slaughterhouse (as much as the image may turn my stomach) is after all quite different from a flower-pot! But the curious thing was that during the time I occupied that apartment, I kept thinking of my parents. You recall that I almost lost contact with them – but then all of a sudden this thought came to me out of nowhere: they gave you your life. And this ridiculous thought kept coming back again and again like a fly that refuses to be shooed away. There's nothing more to be said about this sanctimonious notion ingrained in us in early childhood. But whenever I looked over my apartment, I would say to myself: there, now you've bought your life, for so and so many marks a month rent. And sometimes maybe I also said: now you've built up a life for yourself with your own two hands. My apartment served as some amalgamation of a warehouse, a life insurance policy and a source of pride. And it seemed so utterly strange, such an inscrutable mystery, that there was something which had been given to me whether I had wanted it or not; and, moreover, that that something functioned as the very foundation of everything else. And I believe that that banal thought concealed a wealth of abnormality and unpredictability, all of which I had kept safely hidden from myself. And now comes the story of the nightingale.

It began on one evening much like any other. I'd stayed home, and after my wife had gone to bed, I sat myself down in the study; the only difference that night was that I didn't reach for a book or anything else, but this too had happened before. After one o'clock the streets started getting quieter; conversations became a rarity; it is pleasant to follow the advent of an evening with your ear. At two o'clock all the clamour and laughter below had clearly tipped over into intoxication and lateness. I realized that I was waiting for something, but I didn't know what for. By three o'clock – it was May – the sky grew lighter; I felt my way through the dark

apartment to the bedroom and lay down without a sound. I expected nothing more now but sleep, and that the next morning would bring a day like the one that had just passed. And soon I no longer knew whether I was awake or asleep.

In the space between the curtains and the blind a dark greenness gushed forth; thin bands of the white froth of morning seeped in between the slats. This might have been my last waking impression or a suspended dream vision. Then I was awakened by something drawing near; sounds were coming closer. Once, twice I sensed it in my sleep. Then they sat perched on the roof of the building next door and leapt into the air like dolphins. I could just as well have said, like balls of fire at a fireworks display, for the impression of fireworks lingered; in falling, they exploded softly against the window-panes and sank to the earth like great silver stars. Then I experienced a magical state; I lay in my bed like a statue on a sarcophagus cover, and I was awake, but not like during the day. It is very difficult to describe, but when I think back, it is as though something had turned me inside out; I was no longer a solid, but rather a something sunken in upon itself. And the air was not empty, but of a consistency unknown to the daylight senses, a blackness I could see through, a blackness I could feel through, and of which I too was made. Time pulsed in quick little fever spasms. Why should something not happen now that normally never happens? It's a nightingale singing outside! I said half aloud to myself.

Well, maybe there are more nightingales in Berlin than I thought, Atwo continued. At the time I believed that there were none in this stony preserve, and that this one must have flown to me from far away. To me! I felt it and sat up with a smile. A bird of paradise! So it does indeed exist! At such a moment, you see, it seems perfectly natural to believe in the supernatural; it is as if you'd spent your childhood in an enchanted kingdom. And I immediately decided: I'll follow the nightingale. Farewell, my beloved, I thought – farewell, my beloved, my house, my city! … But before I had even got up out of bed, and before I had figured out whether to climb up to the nightingale on the rooftop, or to follow it on the street down below, the bird had gone silent and apparently flown away.

Now he's singing from some other rooftop for the ears of another sleeper, Atwo mused. You're probably thinking that this was the end of the story? But it was only the beginning, and I have no idea what end it will take!

I'd been abandoned, left behind with a heavy heart. That was no nightingale, it was a blackbird, I said to myself – just as you'd like to say to me right now. Everyone knows that such blackbirds imitate other birds. By this time I was wide awake and the silence bored me. I lit a candle and considered the woman who lay next to me. Her body had the colour of pale bricks. The white border of the blanket lay over her skin like a lip of snow. Wide shadow lines of mysterious derivation ringed her body – mysterious even though they must of course have had something to do with the candle and the position of my arms. So what, I thought, so what if it really was only a blackbird! The very fact that an ordinary blackbird could have such a crazy effect on me: that makes the whole thing all the more extraordinary! For, as you well know, while a single disappointment may elicit tears, a repeated

disappointment will evoke a smile. And meanwhile I kept looking at my wife. This was all somehow connected, but I didn't know how. For years I've loved you – I thought to myself – like nothing else in this world, and now you lie there like a burnt-out husk of love. You're a stranger to me now, and I've arrived at the other end of love. Had I grown tired of her? I can't remember ever having felt sated. Let me put it like this: it was as if a feeling could drill its way through the heart as though through a mountain, and find another world on the other side, a world with the same valley, the same houses and the same little bridge. In all honesty, I simply had no idea what was happening. And I still don't understand it today. Perhaps it's wrong of me to tell you this story in connection with two others that happened afterwards. I can only tell you how I saw it during the experience: as a signal from afar – so it seemed to me at the time.

I laid my head beside her body that slept on unawares, and took no part in all this. Then her bosom seemed to rise and fall more strenuously than before, and the walls of the room lapped up against this sleeping form like waves against a ship far out at sea. I would probably never have been able to bring myself to say goodbye; but if I were to slip away right now, I told myself, then I'd remain the little lost boat, past which a great sturdy ship would sail unnoticing. I kissed her sleeping form, she didn't feel it. I whispered something in her ear, and maybe I did it so quietly that she wouldn't hear it. Then I ridiculed myself and sneered at the very thought of the nightingale; but quietly nonetheless I got dressed. I think that I cried, but I really did leave. I felt giddy, light-hearted, even though I tried to tell myself that no decent human being would do such a thing; I remember that I was like a drunkard rebuking the pavement beneath his feet to reassure himself that he's sober.

Of course, I often thought of returning; at times I would have liked to cross half the world to get back to her, but I never did. She had become untouchable to me; in short – I don't know if you understand – he who has committed an injustice and feels it down to the bone, can no longer set it right. I am not, by the way, asking for absolution. I just want to tell you my stories to find out if they ring true. For years I haven't been able to tell them to anyone, and had I heard myself talking to myself, I would quite frankly have questioned my sanity.

Please be assured, then, that my reason is still the equal of your enlightened mind.

Two years later, I found myself in a tight spot, at the dead angle of a battle in the South Tyrol, a line that wound its way from the bloody trenches of the Cima di Vezzena to Lake Caldonazzo. There, like a wave of sunshine, the battle line dived deep into the valley, skirting two hills with beautiful names, and surfaced again on the other side, only to lose itself in the stillness of the mountains. It was October; the thinly manned trenches were covered with leaves, the lake shimmered a silent blue, the hills lay there like huge withered wreaths – like funeral wreaths, I often thought to myself without even a shudder of fear. Halting and divided, the valley spilt around them; but beyond the edge of our occupied zone, it fled such sweet diffusion and drove like the blast of a trombone: brown, broad and heroic out into the hostile distance.

At night, we pushed ahead to an advanced position, so prone now in the valley that they could have wiped us out with an avalanche of stones from above; but instead, they slowly roasted us on steady artillery fire. The morning after such a night all our faces had a strange expression that took hours to wear off: our eyes were enlarged, and our heads tilted every way on the multitude of shoulders, like a lawn that had just been trampled on. Yet on every one of those nights I poked my head up over the edge of the trench many times, and cautiously turned to look back over my shoulder like a lover; and I saw the Brenta Mountains light blue, as if formed out of stiff-pleated glass, silhouetted against the night sky. And on such nights the stars were like silver foil cut-outs glimmering, fat as glazed biscuits; and the sky stayed blue all night; and the thin, virginal crescent moon lay on her back, now silvery, now golden, basking in the splendour. You must try to imagine just how beautiful it was; for such beauty exists only in the face of danger. And then sometimes I could stand it no longer and, giddy, with joy and longing, I crept out for a little night stroll around, all the way to the golden-green blackness of the trees, so enchantingly colourful and black, the like of which you've never seen.

But things were different during the day; the atmosphere was so easy-going that you could have gone horseback riding around the main camp. It's only when you have the time to sit back and think and to feel terror that you first learn the true meaning of danger. Every day claims its victims, a regular weekly average of so and so many out of a hundred, and already the divisional general staff officers are predicting the results as impersonally as an insurance company. You do it too, by the way. Instinctively you know the odds and feel insured, although not exactly under the best of terms. It is a function of the curious calm that you feel, living under constant crossfire. Let me add the following, though, so that you don't paint a false picture of my circumstances. It does indeed happen that you suddenly feel driven to search for a particular familiar face, one that you remember seeing several days ago; but it's not there any more. A face like that can upset you more than it should, and hang for a long time in the air like a candle's afterglow. And so your fear of death has diminished, though you are far more susceptible to all sorts of strange upsets. It is as if the fear of one's demise, which evidently lies on top of man for ever like a stone, were suddenly to have been rolled back, and in the uncertain proximity of death an unaccountable inner freedom blossoms forth.

Once during that time an enemy plane appeared in the sky over our quiet encampment. This did not happen often, for the mountains with their narrow gaps between fortified peaks could only be hazarded at high altitudes. We stood at that very moment on the summit of one of those funereal hills, and all of a sudden a machine-gun barrage spotted the sky with little white clouds of shrapnel, like a nimble powder puff. It was a cheerful sight, almost endearing. And, to top it off, the sun shone through the tricoloured wings of the plane as it flew high overhead, as though through a stained-glass church window, or through coloured crêpe paper. The only missing ingredient was some music by Mozart. I couldn't help thinking, by the way, that we stood around like a crowd of spectators at the races, placing our bets. And one of us even said: better take cover! But nobody, it seems, was in the

mood to dive like a field mouse into a hole. At that instant I heard a distant ringing drawing closer to my ecstatically upturned face. Of course, it could also have happened the other way round – that I first heard the ringing and only then became conscious of the impending danger; but I knew immediately: it's an aerial dart. These were pointed iron rods no thicker than a pencil lead that planes dropped from above in those days. And if they struck you in the skull, they came out through the soles of your feet, but they didn't hit very often, and so were soon discarded. And though this was my first aerial dart – bombs and machine-gun fire sound altogether different – I knew right away what it was. I was excited, and a second later I already felt that strange, unlikely intuition: it's going to strike!

And do you know what it was like? Not like a frightening foreboding, but rather like an unexpected stroke of good luck! I was surprised at first that I should be the only one to hear its ringing. Then I thought the sound would disappear again. But it didn't disappear. It came ever closer, and though still far away, it grew proportionally louder. Cautiously I looked at the other faces, but no one else was aware of its approach. And at that moment when I became convinced that I alone heard that subtle singing, something rose up out of me to meet it: a ray of life, equally infinite to that death ray descending from above. I'm not making this up, I'm trying to put it as plainly as I can. I believe I've held to a sober physical description so far, though I know of course that to a certain extent it's as in a dream where it seems as though you're speaking clearly, while the words come out all garbled.

It lasted a long time, during which I alone heard the sound coming closer. It was a shrill, singing, solitary, high-pitched tone, like the ringing rim of a glass; but there was something unreal about it. You've never heard anything like it before, I said to myself. And this tone was directed at me; I stood in communion with it and had not the least little doubt that something decisive was about to happen to me. I had no thoughts of the kind that are supposed to come at death's door – all my thoughts were, rather, focused on the future; I can only say that I was certain that in the next second I would feel God's proximity close to my body – which, after all, is saying quite a bit for someone who hasn't believed in God since the age of eight.

Meanwhile, the sound from above became ever more tangible; it swelled and loomed dangerously close. I asked myself several times whether I should warn the others; but, let it strike me or another, I wouldn't say a word! Maybe there was a devilish vanity in this illusion that high above the battlefield a voice sang just for me. Maybe God is nothing more than the vain illusion of us poor beggars who puff ourselves up and brag of rich relations up above. I don't know. But the fact remains that the sky soon started ringing for the others too; I noticed traces of uneasiness flash across their faces, and I tell you – not one of them let slip a word either! I looked again at those faces: fellows, for whom nothing would have been more unlikely than to think such thoughts, stood there, without knowing it, like a group of disciples waiting for a message from on high. And suddenly the singing became an earthly sound, ten, a hundred feet above us, and it died. He – it – was here. Right here in our midst, but closer to me, something that had gone silent and been

swallowed up by the earth, had exploded into an unreal hush.

My heart beat quickly and quietly; I couldn't have lost consciousness for even a second; not the least fraction of a second was missing from my life. But then I noticed everyone staring at me. I hadn't budged an inch but my body had been violently thrust to the side, having executed a deep, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree bow. I felt as though I were just waking from a trance, and had no idea how long I'd been unconscious. No one spoke to me at first; then, finally, someone said: 'An aerial dart!' And everyone tried to find it, but it was buried deep in the ground. At that instant a hot rush of gratitude swept through me, and I believe that my whole body turned red. And if at that very moment someone had said that God had entered my body, I wouldn't have laughed. But I wouldn't have believed it either – not even that a splinter of His being was in me. And yet whenever I think back to that incident, I feel an overwhelming desire to experience something like it again even more vividly!

I did, by the way, experience it one more time, but not more vividly – Atwo began his last story. He seemed to grow suddenly unsure of himself, but you could see that for that very reason he was dying to hear himself tell the story.

It had to do with his mother, for whom Atwo felt no great love, though he claimed it wasn't so. On a superficial level, we just weren't suited to each other, he said, and that, after all, is only natural for an old woman who for decades has lived in the same small town, and a son who according to her way of thinking never amounted to much. She made me as uneasy as one would be in the presence of a mirror that imperceptibly distorts the width of one's image; and I hurt her by not coming home for years. But every month she wrote me an anxious letter, asking many questions, and even though I hardly ever wrote back, there was still something extraordinary about it; and despite it all, I felt a strong tie to her, as the following incidents would soon prove.

Decades ago, perhaps, the image of a little boy had inscribed itself indelibly in her imagination – a boy in whom she may have set God knows what aspirations. This image could not thereafter be erased by any means; and since that long-gone little boy happened to be me, her love clung to me, as though all the suns that have set since then were gathered somewhere, suspended between darkness and light. Here it is again: that strange vanity that is not vain. For I can assure you that I don't like to dwell on myself, nor, as so many others do, stare smugly at photographs of the person they once were, or delight in memories of what they did in such and such a place at such and such a time; this sort of savings bank account of self is absolutely incomprehensible to me. I am neither particularly sentimental, nor do I live for the moment; but when something is over and done with, then I am also over and done with that something in myself. And when on some street I happen to remember having often walked that way before, or when I see the house I used to live in, then, even without thinking, I feel something like a shooting pain, an intense revulsion for myself, as though I had just been reminded of a terrible disgrace. The past drifts away as you change; and it seems to me that in whatever way you change, you wouldn't do so if that fellow you left behind had been all that flawless.

But for the very reason that I usually feel this way, it was wonderful to realize that there was a person who had for my entire life preserved this image of me, an image which most likely never bore me any likeness, which nonetheless was in a certain sense the mandate of my being and my deed to life.

Can you understand me when I say that my mother was in this figurative capacity a veritable lioness, though in her real life she was locked in the persona of a manifestly limited woman? She was not bright, by our way of thinking; she could disregard nothing and come to no major conclusions about life; nor was she, when I think back to my childhood, what you'd call a good person: she was vehement and always on edge. And you can well imagine what comes from the combination of a passionate nature and limited horizons – but I would like to suggest that another kind of stature, another kind of character still exists side by side with the embodiment that human beings take on in their day-to-day existence, just as in fairy-tale times the gods took on the forms of snakes and fish.

Not long after that incident with the aerial dart, I was taken prisoner during a battle in Russia. I consequently experienced a big change, and wasn't so quick about getting back home, since this new life appealed to me for quite a while. I still admire the socialist system, but then one day I found that I could no longer mouth a few of the essential credos without a yawn, and so I eluded the perilous repercussions by escaping back to Germany, where individualism was just reaching its inflationary peak. I got involved in all sorts of dubious business ventures, in part out of necessity, in part simply for the pleasure of being back in a good old-fashioned country, where you can misbehave and not have to feel ashamed of yourself. Things weren't going all that well for me then, and at times I'd say things were downright rotten. My parents weren't doing so well either. And then my mother wrote to me several times: we can't help you, son; but if the little you'll one day inherit would be of any help, then I'd wish myself dead for your sake. This she wrote to me even though I hadn't visited her in years, nor had I shown the least sign of affection. I have to admit, though, that I took this for a somewhat exaggerated manner of speaking, and paid it no heed, though I didn't doubt the honesty of feeling couched in these sentimental words. But then an altogether extraordinary thing happened: my mother really did fall ill, and it appears as if she subsequently took along my father, who was very devoted to her.

Atwo reflected – she died of an illness that she must have been carrying around in her without anyone knowing it. One might suppose that it was the confluence of numerous natural causes, and I fear that you'll think badly of me if I don't accept this explanation. But here again, the incidental circumstances proved remarkable. She definitely didn't want to die; I know for a fact that she fought it off and railed against an early death. Her will to live, her convictions and her hopes were all set against it. Nor can it be said that a resolve of character overruled her inclinations of the moment; for if that were so, she could have thought of suicide or voluntary poverty long ago, which she by no means did. She was her own total sacrifice. But have you ever noticed that your body has a will of its own? I am convinced that the sum total of what we take to be our will, our feelings and thoughts – all that seems

to control us – is allowed to do so only in a limited capacity; and that during serious illness and convalescence, in critical combat, and at all turning points of fate, there is a kind of primal resolve of the entire body that holds the final sway and speaks the ultimate truth.

But be that as it may; I assure you that my mother's illness immediately gave me the impression of something self-willed. Call it my imagination, but the fact still remains that the moment I heard the news of my mother's illness, a striking and complete change came over me, even though the message suggested no imminent cause for alarm. A hardness that had encompassed me melted away instantaneously; and I can say no more than that the state I now found myself in bore a great resemblance to my awakening on that night when I left my house, and to the moment of my anticipation of the singing arrow from above. I wanted to visit my mother right away, but she held me off with all sorts of excuses. At first she sent word that she looked forward to seeing me, but that I should wait out the lapse of this significant illness, so that she could welcome me home in good health. Later she let it be known that my visit would upset her too much for the moment. And finally, when I insisted, I was informed that recovery was imminent and that I should just be patient a little while longer. It seems as though she feared that a reunion between us might cause her to waver in her resolve. And then everything happened so quickly that I just barely still made it to the funeral.

I found my father likewise ailing when I got there, and as I told you, all I could do then was to help him die. He'd been a kind man in the past, but in those last weeks he was astonishingly stubborn and moody, as though he held a great deal against me and resented my presence. After his funeral I had to clear out the household, which took another few weeks; I was in no particular hurry. Now and then the neighbours came by out of old force of habit, and told me exactly where in the living room my father used to sit, where my mother would sit and where they themselves would. They looked everything over carefully and offered to buy this or that. They're so thorough, those small-town types; and once, after thoroughly inspecting everything, one of them said to me: it's such a shame to see an entire family wiped out in a matter of weeks! I, of course, didn't count. When I was alone, I sat quietly and read children's books; I found a big box full of them up in the attic. They were dusty, sooty, partly dried out and brittle, partly sodden from the dampness, and when you struck them they gave off an unending stream of soft black clouds; the streaked paper had worn off the cardboard bindings, leaving only jagged archipelagos of paper behind. But as soon as I turned the pages, I swept through their contents like a sailor piloting his way across the perilous high sea, and once I made an extraordinary discovery. I noticed that the blackness at the top corner where you turned the pages and at the bottom edge of each book differed in a subtle but unmistakable way from the mildew's design, and then I found all sorts of indefinable spots and, finally, wild, faded pencil markings on the title pages. And suddenly it came to me, and I realized that this impetuous disrepair, these pencil scrawls and hastily made spots, were the traces of a child's fingers, my own child fingers, preserved for thirty-odd years in a box in the attic, and long forgotten!

Well, as I told you, though it may for some people not be an earth-shattering event to remember themselves, it was for me as if my life had been turned upside down. I also discovered a room that thirty-odd years ago had been my nursery; later it was used to store linen and the like, but the room had essentially been left the way it was when I sat there at my pinewood table beneath the kerosene lamp whose chain was decorated with three dolphins. There I sat once again for many hours a day, and read like a child whose legs are too short to touch the floor. For you see, we are accustomed to an unbounded head, reaching out into the empty ether, because we have solid ground beneath our feet. But childhood means to be as yet ungrounded at both ends, to have soft flannel hands still, instead of adult pincers, to sit before a book as though perched on a little leaf soaring over the bottomless abysses through the room. And at that table, I tell you, I really couldn't reach the floor.

I also set myself a bed in this room and slept there. And then the blackbird came again. Once after midnight I was awakened by a wonderful, beautiful singing. I didn't wake up right away but listened first for a long time in my sleep. It was the song of the nightingale; she wasn't perched in the garden bushes, but sat instead on the rooftop of a neighbour's house. Then I slept on a while with my eyes open. And I thought to myself: there are no nightingales here, it's a blackbird.

But don't think this is the same story I already told you today! No – because just as I was thinking: there are no nightingales here, it's a blackbird – at that very moment, I woke up. It was four in the morning, daylight streamed into my eyes, sleep sank away as quickly as the last trace of a wave is soaked up by the dry sand of the beach. And there, veiled in daylight as in a soft woollen scarf, a blackbird sat in the open window! It sat there just as sure as I sit here now.

I am your blackbird – it said – don't you remember me?

I really didn't remember right away, but I felt happy all over while the bird spoke to me.

I sat on this window-sill once before, don't you remember? – it continued, and then I answered: yes, one day you sat there just where you now sit, and I quickly closed the window, shutting it in.

I am your mother – it said.

This part, I admit, I may very well have dreamt. But the bird itself I didn't dream up; she sat there, flew into my room, and I quickly shut the window. I went up to the attic and looked for a large wooden bird-cage that I seemed to remember, for the blackbird had visited me once before – in my childhood, like I just told you. She sat on my window-sill and then flew into my room, and I needed a cage. But she soon grew tame, and I didn't keep her locked up any more, she lived free in my room and flew in and out. And one day she didn't come back again, and now she had returned. I had no desire to worry about whether it was the same blackbird; I found the cage and a new box of books to boot, and all I can tell you is that I had never before been such a good person as I was from that day on, the day I had my blackbird back again – but how can I explain to you what I mean by being a good person?

Did she often speak again? Aone asked craftily.

No – said Atwo – she didn't speak. But I had to find bird food for her and worms. You can imagine that it was rather difficult for me: I mean, the fact that she ate worms, and I was supposed to think of her as my mother – but it's possible to get used to anything, I tell you, it's just a matter of time – and don't most everyday matters likewise take getting used to! Since then I've never let her leave me, and that's about all I have to tell; this is the third story, and I don't know how it's going to end.

But aren't you implying – Aone cautiously enquired – that all this is supposed to have a common thread?

For God's sake, no – Atwo countered – this is just the way it happened; and if I knew the point of it all, then I wouldn't need to have told it in the first place. But it's like hearing a whisper and a rustling outside, without being able to distinguish between the two!

The Lunatic

1913

Georg Heym

The attendant gave him his things, the cashier handed him his money, the gatekeeper unlocked the great iron door before him. He stood in the front yard, unlatched the garden gate and was out.

So. And now the world would have its turn.

He walked along the trolley-bus tracks, past the low houses on the outskirts of the town. He came to a field and threw himself down among the lush poppies and the spruce at its edge. He burrowed his way in, as if into a thick green carpet. Only his face peeked out like a pale moon rising. And then, for starters, he sat up.

Free at last. It was about time they'd let him out though, or else he would have killed them all, every last one of them. That fat doctor, he would have grabbed him by his red goatee and drawn him through the sausage grinder. Disgusting creature that he was. The way he always laughed whenever he came by the butcher's.

Christ, he was a miserable bastard.

And the houseman, that humpbacked swine, he would have smashed his head in for him. And the orderlies in their white striped smocks – they looked like a gang of convicts, those sons of bitches – they robbed the men blind and raped the women in the toilets. It was enough to make you go insane.

And he hadn't the faintest idea how he'd stood it all that time. Three years or four. How long had he actually been back there in that white hole, that big loony bin, cooped up with the crazies? Every morning on his way to the butcher's he passed them in the main yard, lying there, baring their teeth – some of them half naked. Then the orderlies would come and drag off the worst offenders. Dunk 'em in hot baths. More than one had been boiled alive like that, on purpose too, and he knew it. One time the orderlies wanted to bring a dead one to the butcher's to have sausages made out of him. That's what they'd give them to eat then. He told the doctor on duty, but that scum just tried to talk him out of it. So he was in on it too. Filthy dog. If only he could get his hands on him now. He'd shove him down in the grass and rip his throat out – that dirty swine, that dog, that bastard.

And what had they put him away for anyway? To torment him, that's all. What had he done really? Beat up his wife a couple times. That was his perfect right; he was married to her, wasn't he? At the police station they should've kicked his wife out, would've served her right too. But no, instead they had to drag him in for questioning, make a big deal over nothing. And then one morning they wouldn't let him out. Packed him in a police van, dropped him off out here. The idea of it! The nerve!

And who did he have to thank for all this? His wife, that's who. Well it was high time to square up old accounts. And she had a lot coming.

He hoisted his bundle of things over his shoulder and then was on the move again. But he didn't quite know which way to go. A chimney was smoking beyond the fields. He recognized it; it wasn't far from where he lived.

He left the road and turned into the field, right into the thicket. He kept walking straight ahead to his destination. What a pleasure to stamp on ripe stalks whose heads cracked and burst open underfoot.

He shut his eyes and flashed an exultant smile.

It was as if he were walking across a wide plaza. Many, many people lay there, all with their heads to the ground. Just as in the painting that hung in the director's office – the one in which many thousands of people in white coats and hoods lay before a big stone which they worshipped. The painting was called *Kaaba*. 'Kaaba, Kaaba,' he kept repeating with every step. He uttered it like a mighty call to arms, and each time he stamped with a left and a right, trampling the many white heads. And then the skulls cracked; they gave off a sound as when you crack open a nut with a hammer.

Some sounded so delicate – those were the thin ones, the children's skulls. They made a sound like silver – light, airy, like a little cloud. And others snarled when you stepped on them, just like forest beasts. And their red tongues came fluttering out of their mouths like the insides of rubber balls. Oh, it was a heavenly sight.

Some were so soft that you sank right into them. They stuck to your feet. And so he pranced about with two skulls stuck to his feet, like eggshells he'd just stepped out of and hadn't yet shaken off.

But what he liked best was when he spotted the head of an old man – bald and smooth like a marble ball. He'd test it very carefully at first, rocking it a few times back and forth: one, two, three. And then he stamped down, splotch, so the brains splattered nicely, like a little golden fountain. But he soon grew tired of this and then suddenly he remembered the crackpot who thought he had glass legs and couldn't walk. All day he sat at his sewing-machine but the orderlies always had to carry him there first. He wouldn't take a step on his own. If they stood him up on his legs, he just wouldn't move, although his legs were perfectly healthy – anyone could see that. He wouldn't even go to the toilet on his own. No. How could a guy be that crazy? What a laugh.

Why, just the other day, the pastor came to visit and the lunatic talked about that nut: 'Take a look, Reverend, sir, that man there, that tailor, he's so crazy. Such a ninny!' And the pastor laughed so hard the walls shook.

He stepped out of the gleaning; straw stuck to him all over his hair and suit. He had lost his bundle of clothing somewhere along the way. He still clutched a few stalks in his hand and waved them about like a golden flag. He marched straight ahead, muttering: 'Left, right, left, right.' And the burrs on his trousers flew off in all directions.

'Company halt!' he commanded. He struck his flag into the sand at the edge of the path and dived into the ditch. Suddenly he grew frightened of the sun that beat

on his temples. He was sure she wanted to attack him, so he dug his face deep into the grass and then fell asleep.

Children's voices woke him up. A little boy and a little girl stood there beside him. As soon as they saw that the man was awake they ran away.

These two little children drove him into a terrible rage – his face turned red as a lobster.

He was up and after them in a flash. And when the children heard him drawing near, they started shrieking and ran faster. The little boy dragged his sister after him. She stumbled, fell down and started crying.

And crying was one thing he couldn't stand.

He caught up with the children and tore the little girl up out of the sand. She saw the wild face over her and screamed even louder. The boy screamed too and tried to run away. Then the lunatic grabbed him with his other hand and he knocked the children's heads together. 'One-two-three … one-two-three,' he counted, and at three the two little skulls crashed like a real thunderstorm. Then came the blood – so ravishing it made him feel like a god. He had to sing. A hymn came to mind. And he sang:

A mighty fortress is our Lord,
A steady sword and shield.
He helps us through travail and woe,
So that we may not yield.
The old-foul foe
Inflicts his blows
With cunning and evil
He lures the believer,
Beware the sly deceiver.

Loudly he marked each beat with the clash of the two little heads like a musician with his cymbals.

When the hymn had come to an end, he let the two smashed skulls drop out of his hands. He started dancing round the bodies in a kind of ecstasy, swinging his arms all the while like a great bird and the blood on them flew off like a fiery rain.

Then all of a sudden his mood changed. An irrepressible compassion for the two poor children welled up in his throat – almost choking him. He lifted their lifeless bodies out of the dust of the path and carried them into the field. With a handful of weed he wiped the blood, brains and filth off his face and sat himself down between the two little corpses. Then he took their little hands in his and stroked them gently with his bloody fingers.

He started crying; great big tears ran slowly down his cheeks.

The thought came to him then that perhaps he could bring the children back to life. He knelt over their faces and blew air into the holes in their skulls. But the children did not stir. He thought that maybe he hadn't tried hard enough and he tried again. But once again nothing happened. 'So be it,' he said, 'dead is dead.'

After a while, countless swarms of flies, mosquitoes and other insects drawn by the smell of blood came from the field. They hovered like a dense cloud over the wounds. A few times he tried to drive them away but when he himself had been bitten, the effort lost its appeal. He got up and walked away while the thick black

swarm of insects pounced on the bloody holes in the skulls.

Where to now?

Then he remembered his appointed task. He still had to get even with his wife. And with the foretaste of revenge, his face lit up like a purple sun.

He turned off onto a country road that led to the outskirts of the city.

He looked around.

The road was deserted. It wound its way into the distance. Up on a hilltop behind him sat a man with a barrel organ. Now a woman pulling a little wheelbarrow behind her came up over the hill.

He waited till she was abreast of him, let her pass, and followed.

He thought he knew her. Wasn't that the grocer's old lady who lived at the corner? He wanted to speak to her but he was ashamed. To her I'm just the lunatic from Number 17 down the street. If she recognized me, she'd just laugh. And God damn it, nobody laughs at me! I'd sooner smash her head in.

He felt the rage about to flare up in him again. He feared that dark fit of madness. Damn, it'll grab hold of me any minute now, he thought. He grew dizzy; he held on to a tree and shut his eyes.

Then suddenly he saw it again, the animal inside. Crouching down there below his gut like a huge hyena. What a set of fangs! And the beast wanted out! Yes, yes, I've got to let you out.

Now he was the beast itself, crawling on all fours along the road. Faster, faster, or else she'll get away. And can she ever run, but not as fast as a hyena.

He gave off a loud bark like a jackal. The woman turned to look. She saw a man come running after her on his hands and feet, his wild hair white with dust flying into his face. She let go of her wheelbarrow and, screaming at the top of her lungs, ran down the road.

Then the beast took off. It tore after her. Its long mane flew, its claws slashed the air and its tongue hung out from between its jaws.

Now it heard the woman's breathing. She panted, shrieked and bounded as fast as she could. Just one, two more lengths. And the beast is at her throat.

The woman is writhing around in the sand; the beast tosses her about. Here it is: the throat where the best blood is. Always drink at the throat. Sinking its fangs into her gullet, it sucks the lifeblood out of her. God damn, is that ever good!

The beast drops the woman, leaves her lying there and jumps up. Somebody else is coming. What a fool. Doesn't he know there are hyenas lurking about. Such an idiot, too bad for him.

The old man approached. And as he came up close, he saw the woman through his thick lenses – saw her lying there in the sand with her skirts in disarray and her knees that she'd drawn up to her stomach in her death struggle. And around her head was a big pool of blood.

Stupefied, he stared down at the woman. Then the tall grass parted and out stepped a man, all ragged and dishevelled. His mouth was dripping with blood.

'That must be the murderer,' the old man thought.

He was so frightened he didn't really know what to do. Should he run or stand there?

Finally he decided to try friendliness. You could tell straight away that the man had something wrong upstairs.

'Hello,' said the lunatic.

'Hello,' the old man answered. 'What a terrible tragedy.'

'Yes, yes, it certainly is a terrible tragedy. You're absolutely right about that,' the lunatic said. His voice trembled.

'Well I've got to be going now. You'll excuse me.'

And the old man took a first few cautious steps. Once he'd got a little further away and noticed that the murderer wasn't running after him, he walked faster. And finally he started running like a little boy.

'There's a funny sight, to see an old man running. What a crazy world.' And the lunatic laughed so hard the blood ran down the folds of his face. He looked like a frightened devil.

But why shouldn't he run, after all? The old man's absolutely right to run. He'd do the same. Any minute now the hyenas could come back out of the field.

'God, am I filthy!' he looked himself over. 'Where'd all that blood come from?'

And he tore off the woman's apron and wiped off the blood as well as he could.

His memory failed him. He no longer had any idea, in fact, where he was. He set out again cross-country, taking footpaths through the fields in the burning midday sun. He felt like a giant flower wandering through the fields. A sunflower or something like that. He couldn't tell for sure.

He got hungry.

Later he found a bed of turnips, tore out a few and ate them.

In one field he stumbled on a pond.

It lay there like a big black cloth right in the middle of the golden wheat.

He felt like taking a swim, got undressed and stepped into the water. God, did that ever feel good – and so calming. He inhaled the water's scent, spiced with the smells of the surrounding summer fields. 'Oh, Water, Water,' he said quietly, as though calling to someone. And then he swam like a great white fish around the trembling pond.

Back on the bank he braided himself a crown from the sedge and looked at himself in the water. Then he jumped about at the water's edge and danced naked in the white sunlight – big, strong and beautiful like a satyr.

Suddenly it dawned on him that he was doing something indecent. He threw on his clothes, crouched down low and crawled into the field.

'What if the orderly comes by now and finds me like this – he'll report me to the director,' he thought. But since nobody came by, he took courage and continued on his way.

All at once he was standing in front of a garden fence. There were fruit trees behind it. Laundry had been hung out to dry, children lay there asleep. He walked on and came to a street.

Quite a few people passed him without even turning their heads. A tram went by.

He was overcome by a boundless sense of loneliness; homesickness struck him with all its might. He would have loved there and then to run back to the asylum but he didn't know where he was. And whom could he ask for directions? They'd be sure to take him for a lunatic then and that wouldn't do.

And besides, he knew what he had to do. There was still so much business to take care of.

On the corner stood a policeman. The lunatic decided to ask him the way to his street. Then he had second thoughts. But he couldn't very well go on standing there for ever. He approached the policeman. Suddenly he noticed a big bloodstain on his vest. Better not let the policeman see. And he buttoned up his jacket. Word for word, he considered what to say – rehearsed it a few times.

Everything went okay. He took off his hat, asked how to get to his street. The policeman gave him directions.

It's not really that far, he thought. And then he recognized the streets again. But how they'd changed – they even have a trolley-bus now.

He set out on his way, keeping close to the houses, and when someone passed by he turned his face to the wall. He was ashamed.

At last he reached his house. Children were playing out at the front; they looked at him with curiosity. He started up the stairs. It smelt of food everywhere. He continued to tiptoe and when he heard a door shut down below, he even took off his shoes.

Then he was at his own door. For a moment he sat down on the stairs and thought things over. Now the big moment had come. And what had to happen, had to happen – there was no question about it.

He got up and rang the bell. Not a sound inside. He walked back and forth a few times on the landing. He read the name on the door across the way. So, other people were living there. And then he went back and rang again. But again nobody came. He bent down to peer through the keyhole but everything was dark. He put his ear to the door to listen for some sign of life – a footstep maybe, a whispering. Not a sound.

And then he had a thought. All of a sudden he knew why nobody opened the door. His wife was afraid of him – his wife, she had no guts. That bitch, she knew what he had in store for her. So. What now?

He took a few steps back. His eyes got very small, like two red dots. His low brow sank even lower. He crouched and then took a flying jump and hurled himself against the door. It cracked loudly but withstood the force. Then he shrieked at the top of his lungs and jumped again. And this time the door gave way. Its boards cracked, the lock sprang open and he tumbled in.

What he found was an empty apartment. Kitchen to the left, bedroom to the right. The wallpaper had been torn off. The floor was covered with dust and paint chips.

So. His wife was hiding from him. He ran along the four walls of the empty bedroom, down the small corridor, past the toilet, the closet. Nothing, no one anywhere. The kitchen empty too. Then with one leap he landed on top of the stove.

But there she was, scampering about. She looked just like a big grey rat. That's what she looked like. She kept running along the kitchen wall, round and round, and he tore an iron plate off the stove and threw it at the rat. But she was much nimbler. This time, this time he'll hit her. And he tried again. This time. And the bombardment of iron hearth rings crashed so hard against the wall that dust streamed down everywhere.

He started screaming. He shrieked in a frenzy: 'You filthy vile whore, you pig, you …' He shrieked so loud the whole house shook.

Doors rattled everywhere and everywhere a noise arose. And now it was coming up the stairs.

And two men were already standing in the doorway, and behind them a pack of women with a whole battalion of little brats trailing along.

They saw the raving lunatic perched up on his stove. The two men mustered their courage. Then a poker went flying at one man's head. The other was pushed to the ground, and with a few great leaps the madman bounded right over the gathering throng like a giant orangutan. He dashed up the stairs, reached the roof ladder, swung himself up onto the roof, crawled over a few walls, around chimneys, disappeared through an open hatch door, tumbled down a flight of stairs and suddenly found himself in a public green. An empty bench beckoned. He let himself drop down to it, buried his face in his hands and started weeping quietly.

He felt the need to sleep. But just as he was about to stretch out on the bench, he spotted a huge crowd of people approaching down a street with several policemen like generals in the lead.

'They're looking for me, want to put me back in the asylum. Probably think I can't work out what to do,' he thought.

He left the park in a hurry. Left his cap lying on the bench. And from far away he could still see how one of the men waved it like a trophy in the air.

He passed down a few crowded streets, across a garden, through more streets. The crowds made him uneasy. He felt hemmed in; he searched for a quiet spot to lie down. One house had a great big gate. A man in a brown uniform with gold buttons stood at the front. Nobody else was around. He walked right past the doorman, who let him pass without a word – that really surprised him. 'Doesn't he know me?' the lunatic thought. And, in fact, felt offended.

He came to a door that kept turning. All at once he was grabbed by one wing of the door, shoved forward, and suddenly found himself in a great big hall.

There were countless tables covered with kerchiefs and other pieces of clothing. Everything was drenched in a golden light which streamed in from high windows and spread throughout the duskiness of the giant room. A huge chandelier glimmering with countless diamonds hung from the ceiling.

On either side of the hall there were grand staircases on which people were ascending and descending one by one.

'Christ, what a magnificent church,' he thought. Men in suits and girls in black dresses stood in the corridors. A woman sat behind a pulpit – someone was counting out money in front of her. A coin dropped and rattled to the floor.

He climbed the stairs, passed through many big rooms full of all sorts of furniture, gadgets and pictures. In one room numerous clocks were stacked up and they all struck at once. Behind a wide curtain a parlour organ chimed melancholy music that seemed to seep slowly into the distance. Cautiously he drew back the curtain – scores of people were there listening to an organist. They all looked so serious and devout that it put him in a holiday mood. But he didn't dare join them.

He came to a door with a gate. Behind it was a deep shaft with numerous cables that seemed to be running up and down. A big box rose from below; the gate was pulled back. Someone said: 'Going up,' and then he was inside the box, soaring upwards like a bird.

Upstairs he saw many people standing around big tables laden with plates, vases, glasses and pots. Or they were ambling around in the corridors past a row of podiums on which slender crystals, candelabra or brightly coloured porcelain lamps sparkled like a field of glass flowers. A narrow gallery raised above a short flight of stairs ran past these treasures along the wall.

He wound his way through the crowds and climbed the steps to the gallery. He leant against the banister. Down below he saw the people scurrying about. With their little heads, legs and arms constantly in motion, they seemed like hordes of black flies giving off a non-stop drone. And, lulled by the monotony of the sound, overcome by the oppressive heat of the afternoon, sick with the exaltations of the day, he shut his eyes.

Then he was a great white bird up in the wild blue yonder, swaying in the eternal light over a vast and lonely sea. His head brushed against the white clouds; he was neighbour to the sun that filled the sky above his head – a huge golden dish that started to resound with a mighty ringing.

His wings – whiter than a sea of snow, strong as tree trunks – spanned the horizon. And down below, purple islands seemed to float in the current like huge pink mussels. An unending peace, an eternal calm wafted beneath this eternal sky.

He couldn't really tell: was it he who was flying so quickly or was the sea being dragged from under him? So it was the sea.

How jealous they'll be back at the asylum to hear all this tonight after lights out. That's what he felt best about. But better not breathe a word of it to the doctor. He'd just say: 'I see, I see.' He never believes anything. What a phoney. Even if he always says he believes it all.

A great white barge with slow sails floated by in the sea down below. 'Just like one out of Humboldt harbour,' he thought, 'only bigger.'

Christ, was it ever nice to be a bird. Why hadn't he become a bird long ago? And he wheeled his arms around in the air.

Down below, a few women noticed him. They laughed. Others came to look. A crowd gathered – salesgirls ran to fetch the manager.

He climbed onto the parapet, raised himself upright and seemed to hover over the crowd.

A giant light shone beneath him in the ocean. Now it was time to dive; now it was time to swoop into the sea.

But there was something black, something hostile that bothered him – that wouldn't let him come down. But he'd take care of that – he was so very strong.

And he took off and leapt from the parapet into the midst of the Japanese glass, the Chinese porcelain and the Tiffany crystal. Here's the blackness, here it is – and he grabs a salesgirl, puts his hands around her neck and squeezes.

And the crowd scatters down the corridors, staggering down the stairs, falling all over each other. A piercing shriek fills the whole building. 'Fire! Fire!' people cry. In a split second the whole floor is deserted. Only a few children lie trampled or crushed to death at the head of the stairs.

He kneels over his victim and slowly strangles her to death.

The great golden sun is all around him – its waves billow to both sides like towering, shimmering rooftops. He's riding a black fish, he wraps his arms around its head. 'Isn't it a fat one, though,' he thinks. Far down below in the green depths, entwined in a few shimmering rays of sunlight, green castles, green gardens are lost in the eternal deep. How far might they be? If only he could get down to them, just once.

The castles drop ever deeper; the gardens seem to sink deeper and deeper.

He is crying. He will never get there. He's nothing but a poor pathetic fool after all. And that fish under him is starting to act up, still wriggling; he'll soon take care of that, and he twists its head off.

Behind the door a man appeared, laid a rifle to his cheek and took aim. The shot struck the lunatic in the back of the head. He staggered back and forth a few times, then fell with a heavy thump over his last victim, over the shattered glass.

And as the blood flowed from his wound, it seemed as if he were sinking down in the depths, ever deeper, quiet as a peacock feather. And eternal music surged upwards and his dying heart opened, trembling in immeasurable ecstasy.

A Conversation Concerning Legs

1915

Alfred Lichtenstein

I

As I was seated in the coupé, the gentleman directly across from me said:

‘One can’t very well walk your legs off.’

‘Why’s that?’ I said.

To which the gentleman said: ‘You have no legs.’

I said: ‘Is it that obvious?’

‘Naturally,’ the gentleman said.

I took my legs out of my knapsack. I had wrapped them in tissue paper and taken them along as a souvenir.

‘What’s that?’ the gentleman said.

‘My legs,’ I said.

To which the gentleman said: ‘You can take your legs in hand and still not get anywhere.’

‘Alas,’ I said.

After a while the gentleman said: ‘What the devil do you intend to do without legs?’

I said: ‘I haven’t yet given the matter much thought.’

To which the gentleman said: ‘Without legs you can’t even commit a decent suicide.’

‘That’s a bad joke,’ I said.

To which the gentleman said: ‘Not at all. For you to hang yourself someone would first have to lift you onto the window-ledge. And who, pray tell, will turn on the gas if you opt for asphyxiation? To acquire a revolver you’d have to send a servant secretly to go and fetch it. And what if the shot missed the mark? To drown yourself you’d have to hire a car and have yourself hauled to the river on a stretcher by two orderlies, and count on its current to carry you to kingdom come.’

‘But that’s *my* problem!’ I said.

To which the gentleman said: ‘You’re very much mistaken, sir, ever since I saw you seated so I’ve been contemplating how best to get rid of you. Do you think a legless man is a pleasant sight? That he has a right to exist? Quite the contrary – you constitute a dreadful disturbance to the aesthetic sensibility of your fellow man.’

‘I’m a tenured professor of ethics and aesthetics at the university,’ I said. ‘May I present myself?’

To which the gentleman said: ‘How do you propose to do that? You can’t even raise yourself upright in your impossible state.’

I looked, forlorn, at my stumps.

II

Whereupon the lady seated opposite me said:

‘It must be a funny feeling to be legless.’

‘Indeed,’ I said.

To which the lady said: ‘I wouldn’t want to touch a man with no legs.’

‘I’m very clean,’ I said.

To which the woman said: ‘I must admit that I have to suppress a profound erotic revulsion just to talk to you, let alone look at you.’

I said: ‘You don’t say!’

To which the lady said: ‘I don’t think you’re a criminal. You might very well be a quick-witted and perfectly amiable fellow. But on account of your missing limbs, I could not possibly imagine consorting with you.’

I said: ‘You get used to it.’

To which the woman said: ‘Your lack of legs instils an inexplicable sense of profound horror in a woman of normal inclinations. As if you’d committed a disgusting sin.’

‘But I’m innocent,’ I said. ‘One leg came loose at the upset of first occupying my professorial chair; I lost the other while otherwise preoccupied with the formulation of that salient aesthetic principle that led to a fundamental shift in our discipline.’

To which the lady said: ‘Which principle is that?’

I said: ‘The principle that it’s only the structure of the soul and the spirit that matters. If the soul and the spirit are noble, the body will be beautiful in the eyes of the beholder, however humpbacked and deformed it actually is.’

The lady ostentatiously lifted her dress, thereby showing off a stunning pair of trotters all the way up to the thigh, sheathed in silken stockings, stretching like blossoming branches out of her pulpy trunk.

In the process of which she remarked conclusively: ‘You may be right, although one could just as well maintain the opposite. In any case a man with legs is considerably different from one without.’

Whereupon, with a proud stride, she promptly took her leave.

The Onion (Merzpoem 8)

1919

Kurt Schwitters

It was a very momentous day, the day on which I was to be slaughtered. (Fear not, have faith!) The king was ready, the two attendants were on hand. The butcher had been ordered for half past six; it was a quarter past and I myself arranged for the necessary preparations. We had selected a spacious hall for the occasion, so that many spectators could comfortably take part in the festivities. A telephone was within reach. The doctor lived next door and agreed to be on call if a member of the audience fainted. (A memento of your confirmation.) Two mighty pulleys hung from the ceiling to crank me up afterwards, in case I was to be disembowelled. Four strong lackeys stood ready to lend a hand, former Russian prisoners of war, stout, big-boned boys. (Better Homes and Gardens Magazine.) Two immaculate chambermaids were also on hand, clean-as-a-whistle wenches. It was a pleasant thought that two such pretty girls would whorl my blood and wash and prepare my inner organs.

The hall had been swept and scrubbed clean for the occasion. I had them place two long, white, smooth-topped tables against one wall; on the surface they'd stacked some dishes, knives and forks. I just had them bring over a water basin, water and a washcloth, some soap too (only Ivory). Anna and Emma, the two scullery maids, brought a bucket and whisk. It is, after all, a curious feeling to know that you are to be slaughtered in ten minutes' time. (The sacrifices of motherhood.) I had never yet in all my life been slaughtered. You've got to be ripe to be ready. It's high time when the potatoes have been dug up and the oats harvested, that's the time to act. We haven't really even had much of a summer yet. Ten minutes can seem very long. (Faith, Love, Hope.) (Ducks go goosing along on the lawn.) Everything, down to the smallest detail, has been made ready.

Then the princess made her appearance. She had a short white skirt on, a little wrinkled from sitting but even the wrinkles looked good on her. The church steeple is very tall, you see. The tassel-time of spring dedicated in friendship. Leap restlessly kicking dainty little princess legs. How I love those fickle kicking littleladylegs. Tail wagging sour cream. She placed her inkwell before me and asked clean-as-a-whistle, all white-lacy-spotless: 'Are you to be slaughtered today?' Hot fish knives spurt blood. I lowered my purple gaze, enchanted by her greeting. 'How handsome you are, Alves Baeselstiel!' she said to me with her red lips blood boiling bon voyage pert little turned-up nose: 'I bring you the world's last greeting. Get thee to a nunnery! (Make yourself at home.) (Headless leather.) Fulling leather belly button bound. You must've had your hands full these last few days getting

everything ready for the big day. (Peace be with you!) How did you ripen so quickly, you're almost over-ripe! Cast a cheerful eye upon your ripened self! May it always bring you joy! How nice that the weather has stayed so nice on your slaughter day so that the butcher can ride over by bicycle. (Genuine hand-made in Brussels.) Be healthy and happy.' 'Allow me, princess, to place a call to the butcher. It's half past seven and he isn't here yet.' 'Hello! Is this the butcher? The spectators are getting restless, why don't you come on over?' (From here to eternity!) 'Go ahead and start the festivities! I've just pinioned my sister as a weather-vane on the church steeple. The steeple is very pointy, and spears fish in the whiplash wind. The lightning rod was very rusty and didn't slide so smoothly through my sister's stomach. Still naked blade spears fish in whiplash wind. Just begin with the formalities, I'll be right over!'

I had them call the king. 'Your Majesty, I commend to you my beautiful body! My corpse is in your hands!' (The six-pronged millimetre slicer measure costs only twenty pfennig.) The king winked. (Fortuna sharpeners.) The two attendants, all decked out in black frock coat and black gloves, top hat and a black armband, stationed themselves on either side of the king. A black dog flew by, yapping. The king winked again. The four Russians, and Anna and Emma prepared to lend a hand. The king winked again. The attendants approached me, introduced themselves and asked after my last wish. (The sky's the limit!/ This is your life, pal!) I requested that the princess sing the great Workers' Song and then kiss me! (Headless necks, genuine calf's leather.) A lady in the king's entourage swooned. They called the doctor. Heart a-racing. The princess sang:

> Comrade Organist
> C-sharp-D
> D-sharp-It
> You your yours yup,

the whole Workers' Song. Lamp-post players kissing wide skirts waving lacy kisses. Sling arm in arm wide skirts waving neck lace warm pipes smooth sleek fish karp, karp, karp. (Prier de fermer la porte.) Please, please door shut, you, you, you! I love you so very much! (The world with all its sins.) I'm ready to be slaughtered!

The king winked again, the butcher stepped forward. The place went silent. Pro patria est, dum ludere videmur. (Blue-red-yellow girls' brigade.) (No smoking, no fingering unlit cigars.) Two attendants attend to the butcher's bicycle. (Necessary casualty.) One attendant brings over a club, balloon bulging lemon pale. (Hold on to what you have!) The butcher wears a blue-striped smock fluttering fabric. (Sugar beet girls.) October is conducive to ceremony rival lackeys. Go! Dumdum me! The butcher leans back, head tilted, the club raised ready. (Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home/a slaughterhouse.) The butcher leaps forward (That's true love!), swings a club down down heavy heavy heavy blow, ardent swing down heavy heavy heavy very very very very—

My skull cracked open.

I had no recourse but to collapse; so I collapsed lapsed lapsed, flat. Aaaaa aaaaaaa aaa aaaaa a. (Applause throughout the house.)

What now? They bound up my arms and legs in, bound bound me up. Lowered slung flat collapse crooked carcass. (General call to all blue- and white-collar operatives.) They speared me in the side. Blood spurted bucket blue spray red thick whip. Whirl girls whirl it up wheels engines roaring whirl Emma Anna. (Today you have given your heart in holy matrimony!) The king asked for a sip. Blue fell flame death very down very down. Hollow burned the belly flame sulphur blood. The king has been missing a beard ever since. Semper fidelis, duty calls. (Transmitted straight from the newsroom.) Everything has its crime and treason. (Amplifiers, Collective League for Capitalist Construction, Ltd, Berlin.)

They wanted to disembowel me. (New new mocha candies, sweet taste that can't be beat.) Transfers drive knife slit shivering innards. (Arms for Peace.) It was a very elegant garden restaurant. A thousand pleasures flooded my guts saviours tomorrow twenty. Only three chandeliers had that greenhouse grown socket sprouted. (Storm of applause.) Mooncalf glows soft inside innards drawn fat excruciating ear attack. (Everything for the Red Army.) Clean, clean, be clean girls, wash it clean, don't let it burn. (God be with you.) (God be with you.)

Flame scorching, flame scorching! Earthworms make merry in my gut, tickle me quietly. The king craves my eyes. Bring me, daughter, the eyes of the Baptist! (Today you leave your father's house!) The eyes round balls smooth slime inside spring out softly, melts in your mouth not in your hands. On a plate with knife and fork they served up the eyes. (Deaf and dumb veterans will receive advice and information free of charge.) Smooth slimed oyster eyes sink stomach heavy. Children under twelve will only be admitted under adult supervision, children under eight must also be led by the hand when asked by the management. (Admission price fifty cents, or at least a buck.)

'Poison!' cried the king and writhed on the ground. (The future depends on the fruit of the womb.) 'Sweet dreams, darling, I've been poisoned.' (August has thirty-one days, the days are reduced by an hour and fifty-six minutes.) Yes, isn't it awful! 'Lord, you are my rock and my salvation!' Two mushrooms grew stalk-eyed smooth onion bulbs spurting milk and drilled holes a pair into the king's royal gut. Eyes eyed cross-eyed. Silently shrieked king chalk-like on the collective blackboard. The princess suffered filial heart palpitations. (Acetylene banishes the odour of bodily secretions.) She was so sorry for her father. The doctor was called over and took pains to tend to the holes in the king's gut. (Veritas vincit, with Anna Blume playing the lead.) The old king swooned. Terror mounts in silver strains stone upon stone. The princess winked and ordered me to be put back together again. (This is how bed feathers get cleaned, dusted, washed, steamed and blown dry.)

They started to put me back together. First with a delicate jolt my eyes were reinserted in their sockets. (Fear not, faith, love, hope are your guiding lights.) Then they fetched back my inner organs. Fortunately, none of it had yet been cooked or ground into sausage meat. (Vaincu, mais non dompté.) It'd still be nice to have a mild fall. As a consequence of my own magnetic drives, my innards immediately flew back into place and refastened themselves in rapid reverse as soon as they were reinserted. (Marriage is the key to a happy life.) A slight disorder in the

arrangement of my reconstituted inner organs gave rise to a few minor organic problems. (St Florian moved into the new German Theatre, enjoying a nightly storm of applause.) But I immediately noticed what was wrong and jiggled my inner magnet power lines AC-DC back and forth a bit, criss-cross, one two one two one two one to rearrange the beam in my eye. I tugged and twisted with a fierce magnetic fury till everything was back in its proper place again. My knowledge of man's inner workings came in awfully handy here. (A year's probation, then a permanent position in the Prussian civil service.) Yes, indeed! My solid parts had meanwhile reassembled, only my blood was still lacking. (Bordens sweet milk chocolate.) The scullery maids held the cup of blood beneath the incision in my side and whisked with a backwards motion. The king gave off a loud groan. My inner magnetism worked wonders drawing a thick gush of blood from the rich red cup up into my thirsty wound. (A girl is not allowed to be told what every woman must know.) My arteries slowly swelled, my inner parts pumped blood. But my heart as yet refused to thump, I was still dead. (WET PAINT.) The butcher brought his knife back to the wound in my side, pierced deeply and promptly pulled the blade back out, and – the wound closed shut. (Tear along the dotted line and mail to the above address.) That's why every woman considering matrimony ought to find out the facts. So I had all my parts back together again with just a few things missing, since shreds of my physical self stayed stuck to the knife. Where there's a will there's a way, they say, if the moment is ripe. But a good deal of blood was lacking since the king had drunk it. (All for the Workers' Cause.) I've been a little anaemic ever since. Take the bird home with you and buy yourself a cage. They lowered reel real pulley-like. Then I had to rise, intuitively I felt it, and so I rose; rapidly at first, then ever more slowly till I was standing upright. (My ticker and yapper are out of kilter.) In Burgundy arose a maiden fair; I'm only a woman, sir. Be mindful, child, of where you're bound! Be pious and good! Have faith and face life without fear! (Vote Socialist!) The two cup-bearers assumed a ceremonial stance beside me and grasped my clumsy paws. (Prescriptions filled for all health plans.) Alas, my childhood days are gone, life's bitter battle has begun. I was very curious how exactly they intended to bring me back to life. (Isthmus Organizer by Jefim Golycheff.) Touching artworks is strictly forbidden. I felt dizzy. (Strindberg silently undermining Stramm.) Our dear old teacher liked to spice up his lessons with a little humour, and we were glad he did. (A snatch of sunshine.) I believe in absolutely nothing. (Trombone tones.) You guessed it! Arise, oh gentle Sunday school teachers, Germany needs you! (What a man ought to know about pregnancy and birthing!) Your mouth is a semi-circular saw. (Dr Sunshine, D.D.S.) The butcher picked up his cudgel again (The tragedy of becoming human), stood before me (Consider man's behaviour during pregnancy) and softly laid the brutal instrument against my split skull. (Rudolf Bauer is an artist, after all.) Anna Blume bathed in lilac blue roses shoots barbs blank abed in a Posturepedic mattress. (Ripe for plucking, inwardly composed.) Partial explanation misses the point. Then the butcher took a mighty leap backwards. (The colonel is and will always be a gentleman even if he happens to be an idiot.) The woman must know everything

about it. A mighty crash resounded as the cudgel separated from my head. The occasion suggests a book for women only. Table of contents: 1. How to Hook a Man. 2. The Tamed Shrew. 3. What Girls Look for in a Guy. 4. Advice on Kissing. 5. How to Make an Impression. 6. How to Respond to a Bouquet of Flowers. 7. Is Fear of Marriage Justified? 8. Causes of Coyness. 9. Old-fashioned Views. 10. How to Take it Slowly. 11. Some Good Advice. 12. Is Love Blind? 13. How to Recognize True Love. 14. A Prospective Suitor's Past. 15. The Most Intimate Facts. 16. The Rebirth of Religion. 17. The Dark Star. The butcher leapt backwards to his original position. (He should be your Lord and Master.) She's the boss's right hand, no blemish on that girl's good reputation. (Jamais embrassée.) The severed sections of my skull flew back together, I was more or less my old self again. (A sweet consummation.) You don't know how to make dumplings, dear, and pickles make my face break out. After all, theatre is only geared to figments of the imagination, artificial people. Delivery upon receipt of payment, the book is lavishly illustrated. It was an uncanny feeling to be alive again. Seltzer sails aloft luminous scent of Maria. I sensed that a little posturing Lazarus-like was expected of me, so I postured. (The king is dead.) With a sweeping gesture I marched over to the princess and silently gave her my hand. (Kiss me!) The princess fell down on her sweet knees before me. (We're all from the same neighbourhood.) The doctor, meanwhile, gnawed on ham hocks. For a continuation of the help wanted ads, see the Sunday supplement. She begged me with all her heart to save her father. (Heaven Can Wait) I knew that kindness wasn't called for here, kindness is the sign of a fool. (Be adamant Anna Blume.) (You're at a dangerous age.) 'Your father, the king,' I said, 'the king stays dead.' (Whet your blade on a genuine seal skin barber strap.) The doctor swooned. I ordered that two yellow candles be inserted in the holes in his majesty's royal gut and that they be ceremoniously lit. (Postage stamps are acceptable forms of payment.) When the little flame burned all the way down into the king's innards, the king exploded. The people called out a rousing hip-hip-hurrah on my behalf. (Socialism means work.)

A Raw Recruit

1922

*Klabund**

Though I've long been deceased, I recently received a draft notice ordering me to report for active duty. This surprised me no end, and despite the stir my appearance aroused on the street I dutifully presented myself at the district command post.

'Excuse me, sir,' I rattled my teeth and shook the bone dust from my feet, 'there must be some mistake here. I expired back in 1797 in the Great Revolution – of natural causes, as strange as that may seem: I choked on a chicken bone. And now I'm supposed to serve my country? Isn't this a contradiction in terms?'

The Sergeant-Major eyed me suspiciously. 'Great Revolution? Are you some kind of Red or something?'

'If you please, sir, the point precisely is that I *am* not. Understand? I *was* …'

'Don't you mince words with me, fella! You're an anarchist! Some gall, to negate God and country, which it is your duty to protect!'

'Sergeant-Major, sir, he who is himself negated can hardly have the energy or the wish to negate anything or anyone else.'

The Sergeant-Major wrinkled his brow. 'That's enough of that! Spare me the philosophy! You have no respect for history and rank! Take it up with my subordinates. When were you born?'

'1747.'

'1747? But for God's sake, man, that means you belong to the national reserves. We don't quibble over dates here. You do have a damned narrow chest. Any other notable physical defects?'

'Bone rot!' I screamed and let yellow dust fall from my ribs.

'You do look a little under-nourished after all! You can go now. Wait for new orders.'

I stumbled down the stairs and almost fell over a fledgling lieutenant, whom I saluted in proper military fashion, for such are the rules at a district command post. I was struck by his fresh young cheeks, his sparkling eyes, his sprightly gait, and before I could stop myself, I fell against his breast and wept without tears. 'Brother,' I cried, 'you too will one day be reduced to dust. Have pity and give me back a little blood. Your Sergeant-Major over there rattled off regulations. Put some meat on my ribs and I will gladly be your cannon fodder a thousand times over. Oh to breathe again but for an instant! Look, I have no lungs left and cannot rightly be called alive!'

Brusquely, the lieutenant shoved me away from him and pinched his monocle in his right eye socket. 'Are you drunk, man, to make so familiar with a Prussian

officer? Three days in the guardhouse!'

He signalled to an adjutant. Before they could catch me I bounded down the steps and made tracks back to the cemetery, where, weary of the day's events and reluctant to lose my earthly freedom, I stretched myself out in my coffin and pulled the lid shut. Let them look for me. They won't have an easy time of it. The mailman, who knows my plot number, won't betray me, he knows for dead certain that he'll get a handsome tip for every registered letter he delivers.

The Time Saver

1914

*Ignaz Wrobel**

On 27 February 1926, this is how things stood.

The gentlemen in white coats filled the big hall, moving about uneasily, laughing, gesticulating and exchanging heated words all at the same time. For they had just spent the last two hours positively riveted, alternately pointing at the unwieldy apparatus on display in the middle of the lecture hall and at the deathly pallid little man seated on a stool, listening intently to his explanations delivered in a quiet voice … The German Professor Gottlieb Waltzemüller had invented the Time Saver.

The apparatus stored time. It was not at all as complicated as you might think, and if you go to the patent office you can see for yourself that I'm right; for there you'll find the blueprint of that thing that – back then, at least, of course it's different today – looked like a covered steel-frame bed. You inserted yourself, and the time saved – since no clocks, neither electric, wind-up nor hourglass, worked within – you could re-fasten and -affix to your life wherever needed …

It caused quite a stir! Dilly-dallying was suddenly a pastime of the past the world over. No one had any time to lose. The expression 'I have no time' became a fixed term for oaths of disclosure of temporal bankruptcy, and it was altogether astounding how people rushed to be done with their obligations. They saved! Not a soul still had time for anything else but hastily to wolf down the necessary nourishment and then to load themselves, contented, into the apparatus. In it you saved time, literally laid it away. Who still had time for a leisurely stroll? Who still had eyes for the happenings of this world? People no longer read, people no longer loved, people no longer took pleasure – they saved.

Carnegie had time for everything. He even squandered it, as if he had plenty to spare. But provision had been made: he bought up time. And thousands of poor devils had to pinch and scrape so that that little white-haired gentleman could take his time peeling a pear or even take a leisurely stroll.

There was a time stock exchange. Time was traded there – and since it was worth a pretty penny, entire villages thrust themselves, lock, stock and barrel, into that steel contraption, saved and sold to the highest bidder. The price dropped after that – but a time trust succeeded in re-establishing a bull market.

One time somebody cornered the market: Mr Woolf from New York, who, having suffered a terrible death after reading a popular novel that ended badly, came back to life, after sensing a fabulous business opportunity, and bought up – at the time, I think, he had amassed a total of 7,000 years – but was subsequently encircled by competitors and had to dump his stock. A day dropped to five cents, and people

slacked off, what a damn shame. The theatres opened for business, well-heeled gentlemen started playing soccer and you could once again see members of the middle class idling, free and easy, on their doorstep in the glimmer of the setting sun, dreamily picking their noses …

But the time of plenty passed; a month rose to a good eighty dollars, and everything returned to the way things were before.

That's how things stood when a curious bit of news was disseminated around the world. Near Munich, it was said, there lived a man who didn't even save a second! Can you imagine? He was a medical doctor by the name of Bruck. Dr Bruck …

Some wealthy individuals – for the others had no time – resolved to see this strange specimen of humanity for themselves. Indeed, as they approached his modest residence, they spied a man with a goatee smoking a pipe, a long pipe, on the porcelain bowl of which – you could see it clearly – a flowery wreath was painted with angels holding up the garland edges … The man puffed contentedly and blew little clouds of smoke in the warm summer air, in which, like light blue gauze veils, they slowly drifted upwards … And then this odd individual cheerfully followed their rise, and when one cloud vanished he sent another one after it, and may well have amused himself with this cloud game a good long time. And what's more: he relit the pipe every time it went out and refused to burn, three times in a row. Then it burned. Wasn't he a sight? … So it seemed.

For when, so as not to waste much time, the wealthy Munich wholesale butcher Mauermeier hastily thrust himself into the man's field of vision, the latter responded thusly: 'How do you do!' he said and chewed right contentedly on the mouthpiece of his glowing pipe. And before Mauermeier had rightly recovered from the shock, the doctor continued: 'What would you say to a little digestive stroll? Look what a lovely green is the waving grass, over which the wind wafts, and the heights over there, up which I propose to climb, are already a diaphanous blue, which bodes well for tomorrow's weather.'

Whereupon Mauermeier took the time – since that's what it was there for, and he could afford it, thank God! – he took the time to blurt out: 'They ought'a lock you up, fella, for squandering precious time!'

Whereupon Mauermeier headed off, at a trot, in the direction of the station, so as not to miss the train to Munich, so that he could go right back to saving …

But the doctor just stood up with a chuckle, reached for his walking stick, his faithful companion on all peregrinations, and crossed the clean, quiet quarter in which he lived, gazed good-naturedly at the wide streets and squat houses and at the little octagonal tower atop the pub. Up there in an octagonal little room with a splendid view of the village and the mountains lived a mad countess, rumour had it, and when the cloud clusters passed through the rain-soaked firmament they brushed by the eight little windows, the oven smoked, and a white-haired lady crept up the winding staircase, muttering to herself, to end a lost life here … the doctor pondered this a moment, and then looked to see if the hospital was still in the same place, then turned to the post office, in front of which an old rattle-trap of a coach minus horses was parked, and then turned to the *Rathaus* – and, puffing all the

while, could not finally withstand the temptation to complete a little poem that touched upon it all: how lovely was that little allotment of life, and how you only get one go of it, and how he, for his part, didn’t give a hoot about all the Mauermeiers and time-savers of this world …

The Tattooed Portrait

1941

Egon Erwin Kisch

Evenings when the coast was clear, that is, when I no longer had to fear a visit from the night guard, I could slip out of my solitary cell, though I had to remain in the guardhouse. I made my way to the watch-tower, where the prisoners gathered after a day spent behind walls, wood and iron, to see other souls, exchange chit-chat and play cards.

With the arrival of the lithographer from the regimental orderly room, a lance-corporal under arrest, a new mood took hold in our midst. He heaped curses on 'Old Pig's Snout' who, 'on account of a mere trifle', issued the order of his arrest.

By 'mere trifle' the new arrestee was referring to the fact that, thanks to a lithographed regimental command order prepared and issued by his own hand, he had personally promoted a corporal to sergeant. 'My friend, the man I promoted,' he said, 'would have made a ten times better sergeant than anybody picked by that colonel, that "Old Pig's Snout".'

Not only did the lithographer make a stink about the injustice of it, but also about the ingratitude of the colonel: 'And to think that I did that Pig's Snout so many favours.'

'*You* did favours for the colonel?'

'I painted his apartment, drew place cards for his dinner table and enlarged the photograph of the colonel's wife. Which now hangs framed in their bedroom; and me, I sit here under arrest – there's fine thanks for you! But when I'm back in my civvies, I'll salt his snout for him, the ungrateful swine.'

My fellow prisoners delighted in these outbursts, since it was a superior officer being insulted or threatened. I had once seen him in passing at our swearing-in ceremony. Another time, when I stood guard at the entrance to the barracks, he stormed by disdainfully without acknowledging me and my rifle raised in salute. I was, after all, a lowly private,* and as such, for a professional officer, the lowest form of life. As we learnt at our very first military training lesson, our colonel had risen from the ranks. Serving under Field Marshal Radetsky, the then eighteen-year-old Corporal Ferdinand Knopp had with his battalion shot himself up an entire Italian cavalry patrol in the West Ukrainian stronghold of Unterhausen. For which feat he was awarded the Emperor Ferdinand Medal – not the highest honour, but by far the most sizeable. On account of its size – more or less that of the lid of a kettle – it was later done away with. When Ferdinand Knopp was knighted and the name of that battleground added as honorary title, his heroism lay a good forty years behind him and he had already risen to the rank of *Oberst*, colonel. An Oberst

Knopp von Unterhausen can't very well be called anything by a lowly enlisted man but 'Oberste Knopf von Unterhosen',† a fair approximation of which might be Lord Colonel Long Johns.

He was perfectly grotesque. Decked out with the sole remaining, kettle-lid-sized medal long since removed from circulation, his entire uniform was likewise anachronistic. He wore his low-brimmed billycock hat in the manner prescribed back in the days of Radetzky, such that, on the one hand, it covered his eyebrows, and on the other hand, the stiff sweat band left off right at the base of the skull. Under this headgear his head looked as if it had been scalped – on top of which, the colonel was profoundly fat and altogether neck-less. His chin descended in steps down to his breast, and his breast continued on without interruption all the way to his belly, the girth of which the stoutest uppermost long-john button could not rein in by so much as a millimetre. But his most noteworthy feature was his nose – not so much the nose itself, for the poor proboscis was essentially blotted out by a fist-sized flabby appendage that blocked its view. The latter growth was bedecked with red-berry-like splodges, so that the sobriquet 'Pig's Snout' which our new fellow prisoner kept hissing through his teeth was by no means precise.

This fellow, our new prison-mate, never grew tired of mean-mouthing Old Pig's Snout while playing cards or engaged in the practice of tattooing. He was truly remarkable at this art. With a dash of the pencil he first flung his sketches on paper – an eagle, a pair of crossed dumb bells, a virgin with realistic features, a writhing, hissing snake, various inscriptions, emblems and arrows pointing to one or another body part. With a cobbler's awl he pricked each client's selected sample into the skin, and to colour it in he pressed a barely still liquid trickle of ink out of a tube. The blood that spurted out of these prick wounds, the ink that failed to seep in and the sweat that oozed out of the pores – he wiped it all away in short intervals with an indescribably filthy rag.

We prisoners surrounded the master and his living canvases, remarking on every dot and line. He was a highly accomplished graphic artist. Though I was disgusted, I must admit, by that rag begrimed with filth, blood and ink. I can't say for sure if I shuddered, but one of the other onlookers cried out: 'Look at the rookie, he's trembling!' I don't know if I went white in the face, but another onlooker added: 'He's pale as a ghost, poor thing.'

Everyone turned with scorn, pity and a sense of superiority from the nascent artwork to me. I had to do something to save my honour, the honour of a lowly private, the honour of an intellectual. 'Nonsense,' I said, 'I'm not trembling and I'm not pale. I'm ready to be tattooed on the spot.'

In part impressed, in part in doubt, somebody said: 'Big mouth! Let's see if he's got the balls.'

A soldier who had just had himself tattooed cried out self-consciously: 'He'll never hold out to the end. It hurts like hell.'

'But it lasts for ever,' said somebody else.

'Do you really want to have yourself tattooed?' the lithographer asked.

'Of course,' I was obliged to reply, 'I said it and I mean it.'

‘Okay.’

He proposed an incised ring on my left middle finger or a tattooed watchband on my wrist. But I didn’t want it to be visible.

‘Okay, so I’ll put it on your chest,’ he said, ‘… or better yet, on your back.’

At this latter remark, an infernal inspiration seemed to light up his look. But since no unauthorized person could possibly see such a tattoo, I gave my consent. We agreed on a harmless still life.

And he got to work on me. But he didn’t start up at the shoulders or at the collarbone, which surprised me.

‘So nobody sees it when you put on your swimming trunks.’

‘Sound grounds,’ I said and gave the go-ahead.

It hurt. I felt the pain of every prick. I bit down hard and repeated to myself: but it lasts for ever. Yet worse than the pain of the pricks, was when the repulsively filthy rag rubbed against my wounds. Even so, I did not let on to my disgust, for the whole gang of jailbirds was gathered in a ring around us.

‘Drop your trousers a little,’ said the master.

‘Why?’

‘I drew the fruits, and now comes the bowl to hold them.’

The onlookers laughed. I couldn’t fathom what could be so funny about a still life.

‘That apple looks good enough to bite into,’ somebody said, and again the whole gang burst out laughing.

‘Pull your trousers down a little lower,’ added the master.

‘Why?’

‘Because the grapes are hanging over the edge of the bowl.’

‘By that much?’

‘I made the bowl too wide, you see. That’s why I have to fill it with more fruit and let the grapes hang over the rim.’

I pulled my trousers down to my knees, felt the cold sting of the needle and the warm wipe of the rag, and heard first one, then another spectator give off a guffaw, and finally the whole lot split their sides laughing.

Finally it was over. I pulled on my shirt, hung around another moment or two in the guardroom and then hobbled back to my cell. Sleep was not an option, it hurt too damn much, I could neither lie down nor sit up straight. My axillary gland was swollen, I had a burning fever. But it’ll last for ever, I tried to console myself.

The next morning I had to go for a medical check-up.

The barracks sick-bay was run by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Böhm, an old buddy from way back when. He told me that just last night the girls at the Café Mikado had enquired when I’d be back. Then he asked what ailed me.

‘Serves you right!’ he laughed, when he found out. ‘You’ll be howling with pain for at least a week. And if you drink, the pain’ll be worse. Well, go ahead, show me.’ I showed him.

‘You filthy swine!’ thundered the Chief Medical Officer Dr Böhm, storm clouds darkening his sunny expression. ‘You swine, you!’ he exploded, whereby, the way

he put it, the word ‘swine’ was hardly as injurious as the dagger-like thrust of that little word ‘you’.

‘Sergeant!’ he cried out into the adjoining room. ‘A criminal report on Private Kisch on the double!’

Stunned and bewildered, I dared point out that the Chief Medical Officer had just a moment ago laughed at my tattooing.

‘You think I’m a complete idiot? Did you really believe I wouldn’t recognize the subject of that tattoo? Do you think, maybe, I might ruin my career for your sake, make myself an accessory to your crime, punishable according to the military code?’

I swore, in vain, that I had no idea of what had transpired behind my back, while Chief Medical Officer Dr Böhm dictated the charges, which is how I found out what I was accused of.

The lithographer, that scoundrel! Now I understood what idea flashed through his brain when he suggested putting the tattoo on my back – on that unseen surface he intended, undisturbed, to slake his thirst for revenge. His revenge on our colonel. Instead of the agreed-upon still life, he slyly and insidiously pricked me with the most malicious caricature, namely a portrait of the colonel, with his head half hidden by the cap, his neck-less corpulence hung with the kettle-lid-sized medal, and his flabby, red-violet berry-bedecked nose.

But all this did not yet amount to a crime according to the military code. The punishable crime consisted therein that the portrait was painted backwards. The head was turned upside-down and from the mouth an exceedingly long tongue extended over hill and dale, disappearing beyond the horizon. This tongue, then, was the ‘overhanging grape’, for whose sake I had to drop my trousers. That’s why the art connoisseurs split their sides laughing; that’s why Chief Medical Officer Dr Böhm feared being charged as an accessory to a crime, according to the military code, and brought charges against me. Insubordination, insulting a superior officer, the regimental commander to boot, which amounted to outright mutiny.

That very afternoon I was hauled off before a military tribunal. The commission appointed to establish the facts of the case comprised three officers. One of them, a lieutenant from my company, was a young and amiable fellow – unfortunately, however, honest and naive. No sooner did he cast a glance at the tattoo than he cried out that it was unquestionably the spitting image of our colonel. Even the depiction of Emperor Ferdinand on the medal was a perfect likeness. After having in this way faithfully offered his expert opinion, he happily took his leave.

Then the next one, a captain, jurist and head of the commission, took a look at the tattoo. He was a sly one, he was, careful not to recognize in a disgusting caricature any likeness to his commanding officer. ‘There’s not a speck of similarity,’ he said, ‘it would be an offence to the colonel to suggest otherwise.’

The lieutenant who had just testified to the contrary turned pale as a corpse.

‘And to see any similarity between that inept depiction on the medal and the wise visage of His Majesty the late Emperor Ferdinand is an outright *Crimen lasae majestatis*.’

Trembling with fear, the poor lieutenant listened. He did not catch the hint of irony with which the captain spoke of the wise face of Emperor Ferdinand; Emperor Ferdinand had been notoriously dim-witted and looked just like his tattooed likeness on the medal.

The major, the third to step forward and offer his expert opinion, was perhaps not very sly by nature. But he was sly enough to grasp why the captain had disputed any similarity between the portrait and the original. Even before donning his pince-nez for closer inspection he declared: 'There's not the slightest hint of a likeness. It is sheer impertinence, an insubordination to even speak of likeness.'

The lieutenant stood at the wall as if awaiting his execution.

'Imagine comparing that puss, that ugly mug,' the major cried out, 'with the face of our colonel! Scandalous! Our colonel is a handsome man, an imposing figure.' And since such a bare-faced lie seemed to be laying it on a bit too thick, the major made a big to-do of supporting this assertion with closer observation. He leant forward, practically poking his nose so deeply in the tattoo that I felt his hot breath. 'Our honoured colonel …' he began again.

Whereupon the door swung open wide, and in the span of its swing no lesser a personage than the model for the aforementioned tattoo appeared in the flesh. Broad-hipped and mighty, Colonel Knopp von Unterhausen strode in. His eyes flashed beneath the brim of his cap. All leapt to attention, but the colonel hardly took the time to think. 'Where is the man with the tattoo?' he asked.

'Colonel, sir,' the major replied, 'permit me to remark that there is not the slightest resemblance. Only a malicious or a foolish mind could possibly infer …'

The colonel waved him off. 'Where is he, I want to know.'

The man in question stood still as a statue, the male equivalent of Venus de Milo. But instead of the skimpy gown she tried to hide behind, he attempted to do the same with his dropped trousers.

'About-turn,' commanded the colonel, and at the precise moment when I'd completed my turn, a din like the sum total of a thunderous boom, the clash of swords and the sound of a cavalry charge rang out in the barracks: 'It's me! By God, it's me! The low-down dirty scoundrel!'

A long pause followed this outburst. All you could hear was the snorting of a wounded tiger, a pained and angry sputtering. Then he let loose a barrage of salvos against the monstrous reproach of the drawing.

'I served under His Excellency Field Marshal Count von Radetzky,' he began with pride and pathos, adding in the same breath that never in all his days serving under His Excellency Field Marshal Count von Radetzky had he ever done what the drawing suggested.

'I served under His Excellency Chief of the General Staff Baron von Benedek,' the colonel continued, and swore that here too he had never … In this way he ran through his record of service, one commanding officer at a time, strictly according to rank, finally declaring in conclusion: 'And I am not about to let a lowly pri—'

He stopped mid-word. The very thought of somehow associating with a mere fledgling private proved so repulsive to him that his voice held its ground. But he

began again: ‘And I am not about to kiss a lowly private on the a—’

And with that solitary vowel, the pronouncement, sentence and life force of the colonel came to a sudden end. He collapsed, still panting: ‘a—a—’

Everyone converged on him, everyone called for the regimental doctor, for the orderlies to look for a doctor, for ice from the officers’ mess and a pillow to rest his head on.

I, too, wanted to help, but the captain in charge of the court panel, who just a few moments before had given testimony that favoured my case and now seemed consumed by his efforts to care for the colonel in the wake of his heart attack, never let me out of eyeshot. ‘You stay here!’ he sharply commanded.

For now my case had taken a turn. The colonel had decided that the caricature represented him, and just one glimpse at the reclining man with the death rattle in his throat dispelled any doubt that, to the crime of which I was accused, the insidious phrase ‘with fatal outcome’ would be added.

The dying colonel was transported to sick-bay in the west wing of the armoury; the fledgling private, the case against him now fanned by collective fury at the fatal outcome of his alleged actions, was taken to the east wing. The colonel found his eternal rest that very evening, consoled in his last moments by the regimental chaplain; the private, on the other hand, bereft of consolation, could not shut an eye. In time to the rhythm of the words ‘with fatal outcome’, I paced back and forth in my cell.

The military justice division was already on the trail of the tattoo artist, the lithographer, but that very morning he had been escorted to a higher court. His crime was forgery, not because the tattoo falsely imputed the colonel’s culpability in conduct unbefitting an officer, but rather on account of his having taken it upon himself to promote a corporal to the rank of sergeant.

The lithographer’s successor debuted with the reproduction of a printed invitation: ‘Those officers who feel the heartfelt desire to mark the passing of our dear fallen comrade-in-arms are herewith respectfully invited to attend a memorial service for Colonel Knopp von Unterhausen the day after tomorrow (Tuesday) at the officers’ mess.’ As to those who may not have shared the heartfelt sentiment, the respectful invitation noted: ‘Excuses will not be considered.’

Private Kysela, a painter in civilian life, was commissioned to produce a life-size portrait of the late colonel for the occasion.

‘But I never saw the colonel,’ said Kysela. ‘At our swearing-in ceremony I was standing way back in the sixteenth company, second division. I have no idea what he looked like.’

He asked for a photograph, but there was none. A person who has a monstrous snout slap in the middle of his face is not inclined to have himself photographed.

The regimental adjutant had no choice but to refer Kysela to my tattoo. I was called to the guardroom, where the preliminary sketch for the portrait had, the day before yesterday, been incised in my skin.

‘Dear me,’ cried Kysela, with feigned horror at the sight of the tattoo, ‘the graphic is hung upside-down. How do you expect me to copy it?’

The adjutant commanded me to lay myself flat on my belly on the table, but Kysela said it wouldn't do. If I did a handstand, then perhaps he could manage to sketch a faithful copy. But nobody can hold a handstand for an hour.

'Could one not with a reflex camera achieve the desired effect?' the adjutant enquired.

Photography was not his thing, replied Kysela; only in his studio could he manage to make a colour copy.

So, despite the suspicion of my having committed a crime with fatal outcome, according to the military code, of having committed the murder of the regimental commander or at least bearing responsibility for his death – despite all that the adjutant was obliged to issue an order for my release from my cell, indeed from the entire perimeter of the armoury. So I received a twenty-four-hour furlough!

Twenty-four hours of freedom! Ordinarily after lights-out, no soldier was allowed out on the street or in a bar, unless he had done overtime duty and, therefore, had an exit permit until a certain hour. But Kysela and I had no time limit. Despite the doctor's warning that alcohol would aggravate the pain of the tattoo, I drank till I dropped. There'd be time and leisure enough for sickness during my prison sentence.

The following morning, as we went staggering up to the house in which Kysela had his studio, we had an awful fright. Two soldiers were stationed outside. Were we under arrest? Or perforce under guard? Neither. The regimental adjutant had, the day before, sent the uniform of the late colonel for the painter to copy, and the two soldiers had been ordered personally to hand it over to the painter. Since Kysela was not at home they spent the whole night waiting.

Which reminded Kysela that he still had to paint and deliver a life-sized portrait today. The uniform was at least something to go on; Kysela could paint a copy. To do the tunic he had to use two tubes of Prussian blue. At least another tube more would have been necessary had Kysela not saved the large blank circular space for the medal, which he applied with brass-coloured tint. In this way the colonel's hulk filled a good three-quarters of the canvas. The cap also proved a great boon, as it practically covered the whole face, a face he did not know.

For the face Kysela only had my tattoo to go on. But, as brazen as he usually was, he did not dare transfer its crass reality to a life-sized oil painting. Only in dabs of reddish violet did he hint at the nose, and so the depiction on his canvas was far and away not as faithful as the graphic on my skin.

Still fresh and wet, the painting was brought to the armoury, marking the end of my furlough. I returned to my cell, reporting in sick with a high fever and was prescribed a special diet.

Framed in gold and hung on the wall of the officers' casino the day of the funeral, the oil painting was duly admired. The colonel's widow asked to see the artist.

'The painting is splendid. You must surely have known my husband quite well,' she said, by way of praise.

Kysela replied that he had never seen the colonel.

‘Never saw him? But how then were you able to capture such a perfect likeness? No photos were ever taken.’

Kysela replied that he copied it from a tattoo.

‘What? From a tattoo? Who had a tattoo made of my husband’s portrait?’

Kysela replied that it was a private named Kisch.

‘How moving!’ Madame Colonel exclaimed, turning to the staff officers standing around her. ‘Isn’t it really truly touching, gentlemen, that a soldier should have the picture of his commanding officer tattooed on himself so as to be able to preserve it for ever? So much love and gratitude for a superior officer!’

The staff officers nodded and remarked that it did indeed attest to a seldom expressed love and gratitude for a superior officer.

‘I would really love to see the tattoo. Please have the private brought to me. I want to thank him for having furnished Mr Kysela the prototype for this beautiful painting.’

Now the acquiescent nodding of the staff officers came to a sudden halt. They balanced nervously, first on one foot, then another, until the regimental physician came to their rescue with the report that Private Kisch was unfortunately very ill, suffering a fever of forty degrees, and could not possibly be called in.

‘Then take me to him,’ Madame Colonel declared with firm resolve, ‘it’s more fitting, after all, that I should go and see him to express my thanks. Where is he bedded down, in sick-bay?’ No, she was told, the man is in the blockhouse.

‘In the blockhouse? Very well then. The major and the captain will have the kindness to accompany me there.’

And so it came to pass, as I lay there flat on my belly in a feverish state, that my cell door suddenly flew open and in strode the major and barracks commander, the captain and regimental adjutant, with a black-veiled lady between them.

She came towards me. ‘I am Madame Colonel von Knopp. I want to thank you for having had yourself tattooed with my husband’s portrait.’

‘Oh please, Madame Colonel,’ I said, a bit bewildered, ‘no need to thank me, it was done … I hardly knew …’

‘I would like to see the tattoo.’

Now the major and the captain leapt forward: that’s impossible.

‘Why should it be impossible if it’s what I wish?’ Madame Colonel’s voice sounded strained, ever so slightly threatening.

‘Beg your pardon, Madame Colonel,’ stuttered the major, ‘I beg your pardon, but the tattoo is situated on a delicate spot.’

‘Stuff and nonsense, I’m a married woman!’ she turned to me and, in a tone of command in which the word ‘please’ hardly mattered, she said: ‘Please show me your tattoo!’

I showed my tattoo. Alcohol and fever had inflamed it with the pink pinch of blossoming life, but that alone did not explain what happened next. Who would ever have guessed that the crass reality of the tattoo could suddenly take a lyrical turn and end up arousing such a stirring declaration of love.

‘Ferdinand,’ whispered Madame Colonel, deeply moved upon seeing the spitting image of her late husband there before her, ‘oh my Ferdy!’ she practically panted, in a burst of emotion, and bent forward to plant him with kisses.

PART THREE

The Experiment or the Victory of the Children

1950

Unica Zürn

One day a man went through every house in the city in which children lived to, as he put it, verify their state of health, and with his polite and courteous comportment secured the mothers' permission to enter the playrooms.

'Permit me to spend a few moments watching the children at play,' he pressed the mothers. His mild expression and the smile he shammed exuded an evident fondness for the vitality of youth. He immediately won the mothers' confidence, all the more so in that he came so well recommended, having furnished himself with a letter affixed with an official seal from the Ministry of Health, and thereby dispelled from the start any suspicion that he might be a burglar or child molester.

The man sat quietly in the corner; he was so quiet that most of the children promptly forgot about him and went right back to playing. Every now and then he took notes, the way a person jots down something that strikes his fancy and seems worthy of record. Consequently some of the mothers thought that he might perhaps be writing out prescriptions for the children, that he was a famous physician or child psychologist, and they were, therefore, somewhat disappointed when he once again took his leave with a polite farewell and without any advice for the mothers or the children.

The man went about his business for several months. Finally, once he'd finished his rounds, he set about drafting a comprehensive report based on his observations.

A gathering of the appropriate experts was called together by his department on the occasion of the first presentation of this report, at the start of which he had to deliver a brief introductory précis before all present got down to the serious business of considering his recommendations. The man got right to the point. His remarks went more or less as follows:

'I would like to sum up my observations concerning the present state of child's play in a single sentence: let's put an end to the individual impulse to play! It's time to create the collective toy!'

The room rang out with cries of bravo. The Minister of Health started leafing through the report, reading passages out loud: 'Feverish concentration of six-year-old Paul over a building game, aggressive defensive reaction against his little sister Ilse who asked him a favour.' 'Ten-year-old Kurt and twelve-year-old Fritz came to blows over possession of a humming top.' 'A tense nervousness displayed by three-year-old Anna while dressing and undressing her doll.'

'That's enough,' said the Minister, 'the congruence between the observed instances is striking. Gentlemen, I believe we all agree that we can no longer give

free rein to the egocentric impulses of children. Our children are our future. I recommend the government-mandated introduction of the collective toy. I ask for a vote.'

The vote resulted in a majority of eighty-eight out of a hundred, the gathering was adjourned and the blueprints for the Collective Toy Industry that had already been drafted well in advance were distributed to selected factories. Production was to begin immediately, Christmas being close at hand.

'In Every Family with Children a Collective Toy' – this placard hung in every toy shop window; on orders from the authorities all toy shops were cleared of the hitherto common and customary playthings, and two weeks before Christmas the pertinent shops opened with the new Christmas Toy Show.

And it was strange and frightening. Mothers and fathers strode in silence through the stores. Of course there were still dolls, cars, trains; but all these things were vastly oversized.

A kind of plaything had been devised and produced that no longer belonged to a single child, but rather to many. To undress and dress such a doll, three to four girls had to really exert themselves carrying, dragging and lifting. The same held true when playing with the trains and cars.

The parents' initial hesitation to go ahead and buy the collective playthings and give them as gifts to their children was superseded by the realization that if they did not buy this toy they would not find anything to give them, since all of the common and customary toys had been requisitioned and burnt. Moreover, the state-mandated 'house-cleaning' of 'outmoded, deleterious playthings' was rigorously enforced, and the city resounded with the cry of children bemoaning their loss.

Only a very small number of fathers and mothers who refrained from Christmas shopping, and who were immediately reviled as unnatural parents and stick-in-the-muds, had the courage not to lay anything but apples, nuts and gingerbread under the Christmas tree. The majority did buy, and in the days leading up to the holiday, strangely determined teams of adults were seen dragging three-metre-long dolls and massive locomotives and rolling balls the size of giant advertisement balloons through the snowy streets.

Just to describe a single scene of Christmas cheer in that noteworthy year: the lights on the tree burned brightly, the parents stood dressed in their Sunday best, as every year, 'Silent Night' played on the radio, whereupon the mother rang the bell to call the children for the distribution of gifts. The children came storming in, consumed with eager anticipation; but tree and candles, parents and familiar song – everything paled at the sight of a red-cheeked, pigtailed, smiling giantess leaning against the wall with her metre-long padded arms outstretched towards them. The children shrieked in horror and ran out.

The father of this family, who, after thorough reflection, finally grasped the purpose of the collective plaything, burst into a rage, forcibly dragged his little offspring back into the living room and carefully tipped the doll forward and laid it on the carpet, its body reaching from one end of the room to the other. The doll's ten-pfennig-piece-sized teeth grinned, the great staring eyes fell shut with a loud

clap beneath a fringed curtain of eyelids. The father unfastened the instructions from a string around the doll's neck and read them aloud. This is what it said: 'So as to afford each child in the family equal access to a toy and once and for all do away with squabbling over its possession, here is a plaything built for three to eight children to play with together and at the same time. This toy is designed such that a solitary child wouldn't know what to do with it, that he can only play with it in a group, with his siblings or friends, the pedagogical merit of which is to rid youth from the start of the notion of personal possession and to teach them that the pleasure of life lies only in collective ownership.'

The children could make neither head nor tail of these new rules of play, and those who had been accustomed, following the distribution of Christmas gifts, to take their favourite toy along with them to bed retreated to their room for a lengthy huddle. On that first night of Christmas they came to a decision which they did not reveal to the adults, for they'd lost their trust in them.

The following morning, gentle as lambs, they strained to drag the massive playthings back to their room. The parents deliberately kept their distance for several hours, so as to give the children the chance to get acquainted with the new rules of play. But when, after a while, baffled by the silence in their children's rooms, they finally peeked in, the children smiled back sweetly.

The floor was clear. The doll (just to cite one example) was nowhere to be seen. But each child held a leg or an arm or an eye in his hand and played with it in self-absorbed bliss. The doll's eviscerated plastic trunk was turned into a skiff. The carpet served as the sea. The little captain paddled about with hand and foot. Even if the children did not rightly know what to do with the cleanly severed limbs and appendages of the giantess, they at least pretended with a serious determination that these were particularly interesting playthings, from which, though not yet assigned a name, one could nevertheless derive considerable pleasure.

Naturally, the state health officials sought to establish how the collective plaything, developed on the basis of the latest research in child psychology, had fared among its little co-owners. The week after Christmas the aforementioned man once again made the rounds of the children's playrooms, once again took notes based on his observations, and presented the following conclusions to a meeting of concerned experts:

'The youthful population of our city displays a frightening immaturity and retrograde tendency. But before resorting to other measures we will introduce the collective plaything in other cities. One thing is certain: we will definitely see the day when the youth of our country unanimously embrace the collective toy.'

Following this announcement, the matter was promptly forgotten. There were absolutely no reports of the success of collective playthings in other cities. Clearly the entire undertaking had to be chalked up as a complete and utter flop. Which only goes to prove that children are the most determined, perhaps the last real individualists.

The Dandelion*

1947

Wolfgang Borchert

The door closed behind me. It is often the case that a door is closed behind you – and you can even imagine it being locked. House doors, for instance, are locked, and you then either find yourself shut in or shut out. Even house doors have something final, impassable, surrendering about them. And so the door was shoved shut behind me, yes, shoved, since it's an inordinately thick door, so thick it can't be slammed shut. An ugly door marked with the number 432. That's what's special about this door, that it has a number and is iron-plated – that's what makes it so haughty and unapproachable; it's immovable, oblivious to the most heartfelt prayers.

And so they left me alone with that thing – no, not only left me alone, but locked me in with it, that thing I fear the most: myself.

Do you know what it's like to be left to yourself, to be left alone with yourself, to be left to your own devices? I cannot say that it's necessarily awful, but it is one of the strangest experiences you can have in this world: to encounter yourself. Naked, helpless, aware of nothing but yourself, without attribute or distraction and without the possibility of action: that's how it is in Cell 432. And that is the most degrading thing of all: to be totally incapable of action. Not to have a bottle to drink from or to smash, no towel to hang, no knife to break out or cut your veins, no pen to write with – to be reduced to nothing – nothing but yourself.

That's damned little to be left with in an empty room with four naked walls. It's less than the lot of a spider that squeezes a scaffold out of its rear end and can risk its life scrambling between the abyss and the net. What net catches us if we fall?

Our own inner strength? Does God catch us? God – is that the force that lets a tree grow and a bird fly – is God life? Then he must sometimes be able to break our fall – if we want it badly enough.

When the sun pulled its fingers from the lattice and night crawled out of the corners, something stepped out of the darkness towards me – and I thought it was God. Had someone opened the door? Was I no longer alone? I sensed that there was something there, something breathing, something growing. The cell felt too tight – it felt as if the walls would have to yield before this force that I called God.

You, Number 432, my little man – don't let the night make you lose it! It's your fear locked in the cell with you, that's all! Your fear in night's embrace. But fear is a monster, and the night can be as fearful as a phantom if you're left to face it alone.

The moon went into a tailspin over the rooftops and lit up the walls, you idiot, that's all! The walls are as tight as ever, and the cell is as empty as an orange peel.

God whom they call good – no trace of him here. And the thing that was here, the thing that spoke to you, was inside you. Maybe it was the God in your gut – it was you! You're God too, so is everything, even the spider and the mackerel are God. God is life – that's all. But that's so much he can't be anything more. There's nothing else. But that nothing all too often overwhelms us.

The cell door was as tight as a nut – as if it were permanently closed, and never would open on its own, the only way to open it would be to break it down. That's how tight it felt. And left alone with myself, I tumbled into the bottomless abyss. But then the spider chewed me out like a sergeant: weakling! The wind had torn up its web and with insect zeal she got to work squeezing out another one, and caught me, a hundred-and-twenty-pounder, in its silken threads. I thanked her for saving me, but she didn't give a damn.

So I gradually grew accustomed to myself. We're a pushover for other people, but we can't stand ourselves. But little by little I found myself quite amusing and delightful – every day I made the most remarkable discoveries about myself.

But over time I lost all ties to life, to the world. The days dripped by quickly and with a stultifying regularity. I felt reality slowly draining from my consciousness while I filled up with myself. I felt myself straying ever further from this world where I had just recently arrived.

The walls were so cold and dead that I became sick with despair and hopelessness. For a few days you scream out your distress – but the will to make your misery known soon fades for lack of a response. Sure you pound for a few hours on wall and door – but when they don't open, your fists soon get bloody and that sore then becomes your sole pleasure in this desolate place.

But there is nothing final in this world. For the accursed door did open, and many others too, and each door spat out a meek, ill-shaven man into a long line of men and flushed them out into a yard with green grass in the middle and grey walls all around.

Then a barking exploded around us and at us – a hoarse bark of blue dogs with leather leashes round them. They kept us on the move and were themselves forever on the move, barking fear into our bellies. But once we'd had our fill of fear and calmed down a bit, we recognized that the dogs were men in blue faded uniforms.

We ran around in circles. Once the eye grew acclimatized to the first re-encounter with the sky and got used to the sun again, you could see with a squint that there were many trotting around like you, detached and panting – seventy or eighty men maybe.

Round and round again they ran – to the rhythm of their wooden clogs, helpless, terrorized, and yet for a fleeting half-hour taking a tenuous solace. If the barking blue uniforms weren't always in your face, you could have kept running around for ever – without past or future: completely wrapped up in the present: breathing, seeing, walking!

That's how it was at first. A festivity almost, a pinch of pleasure. But in the long run – after months of mindless merriment – the mind starts to wander. That pinch of

pleasure's not enough – you've had it, and the fat drops of your bitter lot fill your glass to the brim. And then comes the day when the running around in endless circles turns into torment, when you feel the sky insulting you, when the man in front and the man behind are no longer brothers and fellow sufferers but dancing cadavers only there to instil disgust – and between whom you're latched in like a faceless picket in an endless picket fence, and, good God, do they make you sick. That's what happens after months of running around, penned in by grey walls, fed up with being barked at by faded blue uniforms. The man in front of me had died long ago. Or else he'd escaped from a choky, hounded by a comic demon, and was pretending to be normal – even though he was definitely long since dead. Damn right! Take his bald spot, for instance, surrounded by a frazzled bush of filthy grey hair, it lacked the greasy glimmer of a living bald spot in which sun and rain might still be sadly mirrored – no, this bald spot was lustreless, matt and dried out, as if it was made of cloth. If that strange composite there before me that I couldn't quite call human, that imitation human, weren't moving, one might well have taken that bald spot for a hairpiece. And not even the hairpiece of a man of learning or a high-living lush – no, at best the hairpiece of a stationer or a circus clown. But it's a strong-willed wig, I'll give it that – stays put out of spite, because it senses that I, the hind man, hate it as I do. And I do hate it so. Why must Hairpiece – let me hereby dub him, it's simpler that way – why must he keep walking and living, while young sparrows that haven't yet learnt to fly fall to their death from the gutter on the roof? And I hate Hairpiece for his cowardice – how cowardly he is! He feels my hatred burning the back of his head while trotting around there before me, always in the circle, the same damned little circle surrounded by grey walls, heartless walls, if they had a heart they'd up and scram one night and go and surround some palace inhabited by our ministers of state.

I've been wondering a long time why Hairpiece landed in the clink – what kind of crime could he have committed – that scruff of hair too cowardly to turn and look at me, even though I keep tormenting him. For I do indeed torment him: I keep stepping on his heels – deliberately, of course – and make a foul sound with my mouth, as if I were spewing hashed calves' lungs by the quarter-pound all over his back. And every time Hairpiece squirms, greatly pained. Even so, that miserable tuft won't dare turn all the way around to face his tormentor – no, he's much too cowardly for that. He only turns himself a few stiff-necked degrees in my direction, not daring the half-turn it would take to make our eyes meet.

What might that scruffy mop have done? Was it embezzlement or maybe theft? Or did that hairless patch dishonour itself with a sexual attack? Yeah, that must be it. Just once, aroused by a bumpy burst of Eros, he managed to slip out of his cowardice into dumb lust – touché! – and now he trots in front of me, quietly content and traumatized at having dared do something once in his life.

But now I think old Hairpiece is secretly all in a huff, 'cause he knows I'm on his case, me, his murderer! Oh how simple to be over and done with it in a snap, and nobody would notice. All I would have had to do is stick my foot out, and he'd have gone tumbling over with his stiff wicket-like stilts, and probably knocked a hole in

his head and then all the air would've gone rushing out with a phlegmatic pfff … just like out of a bicycle tyre tube. Hairpiece's head would've split down the middle like pale yellow wax, and the few drops of red ink that spilt out would've looked ridiculously artificial, like stains of raspberry juice on the blue silk blouse of an actor shamming a knifing.

And so I hated Hairpiece, whose face I'd never seen, whose voice I'd never heard, whom I knew only by the musty, mothball smell he emitted. He must, I imagined, have a mild, deadbeat voice without a hint of passion, as meek as a milky finger. Surely he had calf-like protruding eyes and a thick drooping lower lip dying forever to munch on pralines. He wore the mask of a man about town, without any stature and with all the spunk of a stationery salesman whose midwife-ish hands often did nothing all day but take in seventeen pfennig for a notebook.

Enough, not a word more about Hairpiece! I really hate him so much I could easily work myself up into a fit of rage that'd make me bare my soul. That's it. Not another word about him, ever, I swear!

But when someone you'd like to erase from consciousness keeps traipsing right there in front of you in the knock-kneed monotonous melody of a melodrama, you can't get him out of your mind. He keeps bothering you like a back itch you can't reach, so you can't stop thinking of him, hating him.

I think I'll just have to kill Hairpiece. But I'm afraid the corpse would play a grisly trick on me. With a vulgar laugh he would suddenly recall that he was once a circus clown, and would rear upright, dripping in blood. Perhaps a bit embarrassed, as if he weren't able to hold his blood the way others can't hold their bladder. He'd run headlong through the prison wall, first goading the guards to madness and turning them into bucking mules, before, with feigned fear, flying at the wall. From where he would then wag his tongue like a wet mop at us and disappear for ever.

It is impossible to imagine all that would happen if everyone suddenly fathomed just who and what he actually is.

Don't think for a moment that my hatred of Hairpiece, the man in front of me, is hollow and groundless – you can work yourself up into a certain state where you're so infused with hate, so swept beyond your normal limits, that afterwards, once it's spent, you can hardly find your way back – that's how all-consuming my hatred was.

I know it's hard to hear me out, to put yourself in my place. And I don't want you to listen as if I were reading you something by Gottfried Keller or Dickens. I want you to accompany me, to join the tight little circle hemmed in by those merciless walls. Not to think yourself beside me – no, but to put yourself behind me as the next in line. And then you'll see how quickly hatred will take root. 'Cause when you're one of us (notice I now say 'us', it's the one thing we have in common), when you wobble along in our weak-kneed circle, you're so drained of love that hatred explodes like a vintage champagne. And you let it bubble over so as not to feel the terrible void. And don't delude yourself for a moment that an empty stomach and a barren heart will fire you up to extraordinary acts of altruism!

Devoid of all goodness, you'll diddle along behind me month after month, always at my mercy, your gaze forever fixed on my narrow back, my far too flabby neck and my empty trousers, in which, anatomically speaking, I'm a bit lacking. But most of all you'll fix on my legs. Every hind man peers at the legs of the guy in front, and you're compelled to listen and toddle along in lock-step, even if the rhythm is strange and ill suited. Yes, and then hatred will assail you like a jealous woman, when you notice that I have no step to follow. No, I have no way of walking. There are indeed people like that – they have many modalities that never meld into a melody. I'm one of those. That's why you'll hate me, just as senselessly and determinedly as I hate Hairpiece, because I'm your front man. As soon as you get used to my somewhat uncertain, stumbling step, you are suddenly stopped dead in your tracks by my shift to a forthright get-up-and-go. And no sooner do you get acclimatized to this new gait than, several steps later, I'm back to a harum-scarum, languid totter. Mark my words, you will feel no fondness or friendship for me. You have to hate me. Every hind man hates his front man.

Everything would perhaps be different if the front men ever turned to face the hind men, to get acquainted. But that's how *every* hind man is – all he sees is the back of the front man and hates him for his faceless effrontery. But he, in turn, ignores the man behind him – before whom he feels the superiority of a front man. That's how it is in our circle behind the grey wall – but it's like that elsewhere too, maybe everywhere.

Damn it, I should've killed Hairpiece. One time he burned me up so bad, my blood started boiling. That's when I made the discovery. No big deal really. Just a teensy weensy discovery.

Did I already tell you that for a half-hour every morning we trot around a filthy green patch of grass? Smack in the middle of the dancing pony show of this curious circus there was a pale tuft of grass, each blade colourless and faceless. Just like us in this suffocating stockade. Desperately searching for something alive and colourful, my eye passed despondently and altogether haphazardly over these few forlorn blades that, feeling themselves gazed at, instinctively ruffed themselves together and nodded – and that's when I discovered in their midst an unlikely yellow spot, a miniature geisha mingling in the meadow. I was so taken aback at my discovery, thinking everyone must have noticed it too, that my gaze was frozen to that yellow something, and I suddenly looked up with a start and with great interest at the clogs of my front man. But just as you can't keep your eyes off the spot on the nose of the man you're talking to, and so drive him mad – my eyes longed for that yellow dot. And when I came closer, I did my best to make my gaze seem nonchalant. It was a flower, a little yellow flower. A dandelion* – a little yellow dandelion.

It stood about half a metre to the left of our path, to the left of the circle in which every morning we paid solemn homage to fresh air. I literally trembled with fear, convinced that one of the blue coats was already tracking my gaze with his steely eyes. But as much as our watchdogs were accustomed to reacting to every jerk and gesture inside the stockade with a fierce barking, no one had yet detected my

discovery. The little dandelion was still completely mine.

But I could only take true delight in it for a few days. I was determined to make her mine. Every time our exercise period came to an end I had to tear myself from her by force, and I would have given my daily bread ration (and that's saying a lot!) just to possess her. The longing to have a living thing in the cell with me became so overwhelming that the flower, that timid little dandelion, soon took on the consequence of a human being, a secret lover: I could no longer live without her – in there, locked inside those dead walls!

And then came the business with Hairpiece. I started out slyly. Every time I passed my flower I took a small step, as unobtrusively as possible, from the path onto the patch of grass. We all have a hefty dose of herd instinct in us, and that's what I was counting on. My hunch proved right. The man behind me, the man behind him, and the one after – and so on and so forth – they all followed slavishly in shuffle step. And so I succeeded in four days' time to push our path so close to my dandelion that, had I bent over, I could have reached out and grabbed it with my hand. Though some twenty blanched blades of grass died a dusty death, trampled underfoot by a horde of wooden clogs – but who gives a hoot about sacrificing a couple of miserable blades of grass when you want to pluck a wild flower!

I came ever closer to the fulfilment of my wish. As a test, a couple of times I let my left sock slip, stooped down with noticeable annoyance and harmlessly pulled it back up. No one took issue. Tomorrow then, I said to myself!

You mustn't laugh at me if I confess that I strode into the yard with a pounding heart and sweat-soaked, tingling palms. It was just so inconceivable, the prospect, after months of solitude and loveless longing, suddenly, unexpectedly, to have a beloved in the cell with me.

We had almost ended our daily dose of clip-clopping rounds – I planned it for the next to last lap. That's when Hairpiece stepped into action, indeed in the most cunning and low manner.

We had just started into the next to last lap, the blue coats were already jingling the rings of giant keys, signalling our imminent departure, and I was fast approaching the place from which my flower looked fearfully back at me. Never in my life, I believe, did I feel so aroused as in those few seconds. Twenty steps more. Now fifteen, now ten, five …

That's when the most appalling thing happened! Suddenly, as though dancing a tarantella, Hairpiece flung his spindly arms into the air, gracefully lifted his right leg up to his navel and pirouetted to the rear on his left foot. I will never fathom where that lifeless tuft found the courage – he flashed me a triumphant look, as if privy to my dreams, turned his calf's eyes inward till they shone white, and then simply collapsed like a marionette. That's when I knew for certain that he must have been a circus clown before, because the whole lot of us burst out laughing!

But then the blue uniforms starting barking, and the laughter was wiped away as if it had never sounded. And one of them stepped over to the prostrate figure and remarked matter-of-factly, the way you say 'it's raining' – that's how he said 'he's dead'!

I have to confess something here – with all due respect for myself. At that moment, when I stood eye-to-eye with that man whom I called Hairpiece, and felt him succumb, not to me, no, but to life itself – at that second, all my hatred welled up and washed away like a wave on the beach, and nothing remained but a feeling of utter emptiness. A picket had broken off the fence – death came whizzing by a hair's breadth away from me – then I quickly pulled myself together. I'll grant Hairpiece this much in retrospect – he won a presumptive victory, beat me to it, I admit.

The next day I had another front man who immediately made me forget his predecessor. He had the lying eyes of a theologian, but I believe he was released from hell with the express purpose of making it impossible for me to pluck my flower.

He had an impertinent way of making himself conspicuous. He disseminated merriment. Even the pale blue dogs couldn't suppress a human grin, a very strange sight in this place. Civil servants to the bone – but the primitive dignity of these usually callous professional soldier faces was twisted into a grimace. They did not want to laugh, hell, no! But they had to. Do you know the feeling when you're angry with someone and both your faces are masks of malevolence, and then something funny happens that makes you both laugh – you don't want to laugh, not on your life! But the face involuntarily tugs sideways and takes on that all-too-familiar expression best described as a 'sourpuss' grin. That's what happened to the blue coats, and that was the one human response we ever noticed in them. Yes, that theologian was a real piece of work! Cagey enough to be mad – but not so mad as to undermine his cageyness.

We were twenty-seven men in that ring, surrounded by a pack of twelve uniformed, pistol-packing pit-bulls. Some of them must have been engaged in that barking business for twenty years or more, for their mouths had come little by little over time to resemble snouts. But this animalistic metamorphosis did not rob them of their conceit. Every single one of them, just as he was, might have served as an epitome for the inscription: *l'État c'est moi*.

The theologian (I later learnt that he was, in fact, a locksmith who had an accident while working on a church – God took him under his wing!) – he was so crazy or cagey that he completely respected the guards' dignity. No, more than respected! He puffed up their blue-coated prowess into a veritable hot air balloon of inconceivable size, of which the bearers had not the slightest inkling. Even as they laughed at his apparent stupidity, a certain surreptitious pride puffed up their chests and conflated their bellies, straining their leather belts.

Every time the theologian passed one of the watchdogs that stood spray-legged, his power on display, snapping and snarling at us – every time he made an altogether forthright-looking bow and wished him a heartfelt, affable and well-intended 'Happy holiday to you, Sergeant-Major, sir!' – he sounded so sincere that not a soul, let alone the over-inflated hot air balloons in uniform, could have taken it amiss. And his bow was so bashful it always looked as if he was side-stepping a slap in the face.

And so the devil made this comedian-theologian my front man, and his madness made such a spectacle of itself and had such a powerful effect on me that I almost forgot my new little girlfriend, my dandelion. The sight of him so rattled my nerves, pressing a cold sweat out of my every pore, that I hardly managed to flash my darling a tender smile. Every time the theologian made his bow and wished his 'Happy holiday to you, Sergeant-Major, sir' – that dripped like honey from his tongue – every time I had to tense every muscle to keep from imitating him. The temptation was so great that, time and again, I was already nodding a friendly greeting at those symbols of authority and only managed in the very last second to hold my tongue and keep from genuflecting before them.

Every day we circled for about a half-hour round the yard, which amounted to twenty times around a day, and twelve uniforms stood watch at the perimeter. So the theologian must have made at least two hundred and forty genuflections a day, and two hundred and forty times I had to tense every muscle not to go mad. I knew that if I kept this up for three days I'd start going soft in the brain – and I wasn't about to let that happen. I was totally drained when I got back to my cell. But the whole night long in my dream I ran an unending gauntlet of blue uniforms, each of whom looked like Bismarck – all night long, with deep bows, I bid these pale blue Bismarcks: 'Happy holiday to you, Sergeant-Major, sir!'

The next day I managed to arrange to make the column pass me by and I got a new front man. I lost my clog, made a big fuss of finding it and limped back into line. Thank God! The sun rose right there before my eyes. Or rather – it played hide and seek. My new front man was so unabashedly slow that my entire 1.80 metres were swallowed by his shadow. Providence was on my side – I just had to help it along with my clog. The man's inhumanly long limbs just flopped about aimlessly, and the strange thing was he actually managed to move forward in the process, even though he had absolutely no control of the motion of his arms and legs. I loved him, almost – went so far as to pray that he not drop dead, as Hairpiece had done, or go mad and start making cowardly genuflections. I prayed for his long life and the preservation of his sanity. I felt myself so safely sequestered in the mantle of his shadow that I let my loving looks linger longer than usual on my little dandelion without fear of blowing my cover. I even forgave this heavenly front man his disgusting snivelling snout – indeed, I nobly stifled the urge to dub him with all sorts of nicknames, like Oboe, Cuttlefish or Holy Roller. All I could think about was my flower – and so I let my front man make a fool of himself for however long he liked.

The day was like all other days. The only difference was that at the end of our half-hour's exercise the prisoner from Cell 432 suddenly developed a pounding pulse and his eyes took on an expression of sham harmlessness and badly veiled vacillation.

We turned into the last lap – the key rings came alive again, and our human picket fence slept on its feet, soaking in the scanty rays of sunlight, as though embracing the bars of an eternal gate.

But what was that? One picket wasn't sleeping at all! It was wide awake and excitement made it change its stride every couple of metres. Did nobody notice? No. And suddenly picket number 432 bent down, fumbled with a fallen sock – and lunged, lightning-fast, with one hand, at a frightened little flower, ripped it up by the roots – and already seventy-seven pickets were hobbling again round the last lap, according to accustomed routine.

Picture this comic sight: a blasé, contrite young man in the age of the gramophone record and space exploration standing in Cell Number 432 beneath the high-walled window, holding a little yellow flower, a perfectly ordinary dandelion, cradled in his solitary hands, up to a thin ray of light that trickled in. And then this person, previously accustomed to smelling powder, perfume and petrol, gin and lipstick, but reduced for months to sniffing the scent of wooden bunk bed, dust and the cold sweat of fear, brings the dandelion to his hungry nostrils and he snorts so greedily the essence of that little yellow blossom into his lungs that now he's nothing but nose.

Then something unfurls in him and pours like light into the cramped confines, a thing of which he had not the slightest notion until now: a gentleness, an attachment and a warmth he never felt before, binding him to the flower and filling every inch of his being.

Stifled by a sudden sense of enclosure, he shut his eyes in stunned amazement: yours is the smell of the earth, of sunlight, sea and honey, my beloved living thing! He took in her immaculate cool breath like the voice of his father, to which he'd never paid much attention, but which he now found so consoling in the silence – he felt the coolness like the bare shoulder of a dark woman.

Gently he lifted her, like a lover, to his water cup, and lowered her weary little body in it – and it took him minutes – that's how slowly he sat down, face to face with his flower.

He felt so relieved and happy that he took and stripped everything off, everything that burdened his soul: imprisonment, solitude, the hunger for love and helplessness of his twenty-two years, the present and the past, the world and Christianity – yes, that too!

He was a brown Balinese, a 'savage' member of a savage people that feared and worshipped the sea and the lightning and the tree. A people that beheld, revered, devoured, but never grasped the coconut, the codfish and the twittering colibri. He felt so free, and never before had he been so ready to do good as he whispered to the flower … oh to be like you …

The whole night long his happy hands embraced the tingling tin of his drinking cup, and in his sleep he felt them heaping earth on him, dark, good earth, and felt himself at home in it and becoming one with it – with flowers sprouting from his skin: anemones, columbines and dandelions – tiny, inconceivable bursts of sunlight.

Shadowlight

1949

Paul Celan

The heart held out, hidden in the dark and hard as the philosophers' stone.

*

It was spring and the trees uprooted to branch with their birds.

*

The broken jug* will to the well until the well bows to its will.

*

All talk of justice is for naught so long as the biggest warship hasn't been torpedoed by the forehead of a drowned man.

*

Four seasons, and not a fifth to worry about which to pick.

*

So great was his love for her that she might have been able to lift the lid of his coffin – if only the flower she'd laid on it were not such a dead weight.

*

Their embrace lasted so long, it drove love to despair.

*

The Day of Judgement had come, and to scout out the greatest iniquity the cross was nailed onto Christ.

*

Bury the flowers and lay the man on that grave.

*

The hour sprung free of the watch, stood before it and commanded it to run on time.

*

When the general laid the bloodied head of the rebel at the feet of his sovereign, the latter flew into a wild rage. ‘You dared pollute the throne room with the stench of blood,’ he cried out, and the general trembled.

Then the lips of the beheaded opened and told the story of the lilac.

‘Too late,’ declared the ministers.

A later chronicler substantiated this opinion.

*

When the hanged man was cut down from the gallows his eyes had not yet closed. The hangman hastened to press them shut. Bystanders had already noticed and sank their suffering gaze.

But at that very moment the gallows took itself for a tree, and since no one had their eyes open, it is impossible to say for certain that it was not so.

*

He laid virtues and vices, guilt and innocence, qualities and faults on the scale, as he wanted to be sure before passing judgment on himself. Yet weighed down as they were, the scales of justice came out level.

But since he absolutely wanted to know for certain, come what may, he shut his eyes and walked countless times in a circle around the scales, first in one direction, then the other, until he no longer knew which scale held what. Whereupon he passed judgment, randomly selecting one of the scales.

When he opened his eyes again, one scale had indeed dipped lower, but it was impossible to say which: the one loaded with guilt or the one with innocence.

It made him mad to derive no benefit from the evidence, and so he condemned himself, though he could not help thinking that he might be mistaken.

*

Make no mistake: this last lamp doesn’t shed more light – the surrounding darkness was just sucked into itself.

*

‘Everything passes’: this too, and does it not simultaneously give us pause?

*

She turned her back to the mirror, for she could not abide its vanity.

*

He taught the laws of gravity, offered proof after proof, but his teachings fell on deaf ears. Then he raised himself aloft and taught the laws in this suspended state – whereupon the people paid heed, though no one was surprised not to see him sink back down again.

The Secrets of the Princess of Kagran

1971

Ingeborg Bachmann

Once upon a time there was a Princess of Chagre or Chageran, from a people that later called itself the Kagran. St George, the very same saint who slew the dragon in the swamp, so that after the monster's death the city of Klagenfurt could be founded, was also active here in old Marchfelddorf, on the far side of the Danube, where a church still stands near the flood lands marking his sainted memory.

The princess was very young and very beautiful and she had a black horse on which she rode ahead of everyone else. Her retainers counselled and implored her to hold back, for the land where they lived on the banks of the Danube, where later the Rhaetians, the Marcomanni, the Norics, the Moesians, the Dacians, the Illyrians and the Pammonians settled, was always in danger, and borders had not yet been invented. There was also a Cis- and a Transleithania, for peoples were still on the move. One day the Hungarian Hussars rode up from the *puszta* into the far-reaching, undiscovered corners of what would later become Hungary. They brought with them their wild Asian horses, as swift as the princess's steed, and everyone trembled with fear.

The princess lost sovereign power, she was taken prisoner as she did not put up a fight; but she refused to be pawned off as a bride to the hoary-haired King of the Huns or the aged King of the Avars. She was held as a hostage and guarded by many red and black riders. Because the princess was a true princess she preferred death to being bedded down by some decrepit old monarch, and she had to pluck up her courage, for that very night she was to be taken to the castle of the King of the Huns or that of the King of the Avars. She thought of escaping and hoped that her guards would fall asleep before the break of dawn, but her hope faded. They had taken her steed, and she had no idea how she might slip out of the enemy compound and find her way back to the blue hills of her homeland. Sleepless, she lay in her tent.

In the middle of the night she thought she heard a voice singing, not speaking; it murmured and gently lulled, but then, so it seemed to her, it no longer sang for others, but for her ears only in a language that enthralled her and of which she did not understand a single word. Nevertheless, she fathomed that the voice was directed to her alone and called out to her. The princess did not need to understand the words. Enchanted, she got up and pulled aside the cloth that covered the opening of her tent. She saw before her the endlessly dark sky of Asia and, looking up, caught a shooting star. The voice that broke through to her told her she could

wish for something, and she wished it with all her heart. Suddenly she saw a stranger standing there before her in a long black coat, not one of the red and blue riders; he hid his face in the shroud of night, but even though she could not see his countenance she knew that he had cried out for her and sung hope into her heart in a voice never heard before, and that he had come to free her. He held her horse by the reins, and she quietly parted her lips and asked: Who are you? What is your name, my rescuer? How am I to thank you? Whereupon he laid two fingers to his lips, which she understood to mean that she should be still; he motioned for her to follow him and flung his black coat around her so that no one could see her. They were blacker than black in the night, and he led her and the horse which quietly lifted and lowered its hooves without whinnying, led them through the encampment and out a fair distance into the steppe. The princess still had his wondrous song in her ear, and she was charmed by this voice and wished to hear it again. She wanted to ask him to ride upstream with her, but he made no reply and handed her the reins. She was still in the greatest danger and he gave her a sign to ride off. Then she lost her heart to him, even though she had not yet seen his face, since he kept it hidden; but she obeyed because she had to obey him. She swung herself onto the horse, looked down at him in silence and wanted to bid him a word of farewell in his language. She whispered it with her eyes. But he turned away and disappeared into the night.

The horse started trotting towards the river, the damp air guiding its direction. The princess cried for the first time in her life, and later peoples wandering in the region found several river pearls, which they brought to their first king and which are, to this day, amongst the oldest precious stones set in St Stephen's crown.

Once she reached open country she rode upstream for many days and nights until she came to a region in which the river spread into countless backwaters running in all directions. Soon it turned into one big marsh overgrown with stunted willow bushes. The water was still at its normal level, the bushes bent and swayed, rustling in the ever-changing path of the wind of the plain, in which the willows could never stand upright but remained stunted. They swayed gently like marsh grass and the princess lost her way. It was as if everything had been set in motion, waves of willow branches, waves of grass – the plain was alive and no other person trod its soggy ground. The rush of the Danube, relieved to have broken free of the constraint of its immovable banks, split into countless streams that lost themselves in the labyrinth of the canals, whose veins cut broad swaths through the washed-up islands past which the water shot with a mighty crash. Listening amidst the foaming currents, the tide and tangle and the stream, the princess understood that the water was fast eroding the sandy beachhead on which she stood, eroding great hunks of the embankment, taking clumps of willow along with it. The water consumed entire islands and washed others up again elsewhere, and that is how things would proceed on the plain until the time of the high water, when willow and islands would be washed away and disappear without a trace. A smoky fleck hung in the sky overhead, but there was not a trace of the blue heights of her native land. She did not know where she was, she did not recognize the Theban Heights, the foothills of the Carpathians, all still nameless, and she did not see the March flow

into the Danube; nor did she know that one day a watery border would be drawn here, dividing two as yet nameless countries. For there were no countries and no borders to divide them back then.

On a bank of pebbles swept up by the tide she descended from her horse, the poor beast being unable to go on; observing the flood-waters getting swampier and swampier, she was gripped by a pang of fear, for she knew that this was a sign of the rising current and she saw no way out of this hostile landscape, a world of willow, wind and water; slowly she led her horse along, crushed by this realm of solitude, an impassable and bewitched realm she'd wandered into. She started looking for a spot to spend the night, as the sun was setting and the monstrous life force of this river grew ever more insistent in its raging rush and roar, its clapping, its swelling laughter washing up against the stones swept aside, its faint whisper in a quiet bend, its rapids hissing, its never-ending grinding against the rocky riverbed, and all the other sounds on the surface. Flocks of grey cranes swooped in as evening fell and the cormorants started scouring the banks for food; storks fished in the current and swamp birds of every description circled round, piercing the air with their fervent, far-echoing craw.

The princess had heard tell as a child of this grim region on the Danube, of its bewitched islands where one died of hunger but where one also had visions and experienced the greatest rapture in the delirium of one's own demise. The princess felt as if the island moved along with her, and yet it was not the thundering current that made her tremble – rather, she was gripped by a commingling of alarm and amazement and a sense of unrest, never before experienced, that came from the willows. Something deeply threatening emanated from them and weighed heavy on the princess's heart. She had come to the end of human habitation. The princess bent down to her horse, which collapsed in exhaustion and also gave off a plaintive sound, for he too felt that there was no way out and he begged her forgiveness with a dying look for no longer being able to carry her through and over the water. The princess stretched herself out in the hollow beside the horse, feeling a dark foreboding as never before; the willows whispered more and more, they murmured, they laughed, they cried out shrilly, howled and moaned. No troop of enemy soldiers was hot on her heels now, but she was surrounded by an army of alien beings, myriad leaves fluttered over the bushy tails of the willows; she lay in the bend of the river that led to the land of the dead and she had her eyes wide open as the mighty columns of shadow beings swept over her; one moment she buried her head in her arms to blot out the howl of the fearsome wind and the next moment she leapt up again, roused by a terrible tapping, scraping sound. She could not press forward or turn back – her only choice was to be smothered by the willows or drowned by the water – but in the blackest night a light flickered before her; and since she knew that it could not be a human light, but had to be a ghostly light, she approached it with a deathly fear, albeit enchanted, entranced.

It was no light; it was a flower, redder than red, not grown in the earth but burst into bloom in the free flow of night. She reached her hand out to touch the flower, but what she touched, along with strange petals, was the palm of another hand. The

wind and the laughter of the willows went silent, and in the eerie white light of the rising moon that shone over the slackening current of the Danube she recognized the stranger in the black coat standing before her. He held her hand in his and pressed two fingers of his other hand over his mouth so that she would not ask him again who he was, but he smiled down at her with his dark, warm eyes. He was darker than the night that surrounded her before, and, cradled in his arms, she sank into the sand at his feet, and he laid the flower on her breast as one does with the dead, and drew his coat over her and him.

The sun had already risen high in the sky when the stranger awakened the princess from her deathlike slumber. He had made the real immortals, the elements, be silent. The princess and the stranger started talking, as if they'd known each other for ever, and when one spoke the other smiled. They talked of darkness and light. The high water fell to a gentle flow, and before the sun went down the princess heard her horse rise and snort and trot through the brush. Startled in her heart of hearts, she said: I must move on, I have to ride upriver, come with me, never leave me again! But the stranger shook his head, and the princess asked: must you return to your people?

The stranger smiled: my people are older than all the peoples in the world and are scattered by the winds of time.

Then come with me! cried the princess, pained and impatient.

But the stranger replied: patience, be patient, you know now, you know.

In the night the princess had grown a second face, and so she said, tears streaming from her eyes: I know we'll see each other again.

Where, smiled the stranger, and when? Endless is the ride ahead.

The princess peered down at the wilted flower, its lustre extinguished, left lying on the ground, and whispered, with eyes shut tight, on the edge of dreams: let me see!

Slowly she started to tell: it will be further upriver, the peoples will resume their migration, it will be in another century, let me guess, it will be more than twenty centuries from now, you will say as people do: beloved …

What is a century? asked the stranger.

The princess picked up a handful of sand and let it run swiftly through her fingers; she said, that's about twenty centuries, then the time will come when you return and kiss me.

Then it will be soon, said the stranger, go on!

It will be in a city and in this city it will be on a street, the princess continued, we'll be playing cards, I will close my eyes, in the mirror it will be Sunday.

What are city and street? asked the baffled stranger.

Stunned, the princess replied: we'll soon find out, I only know the words, but we'll see what they are when you drive thorns through my heart, we'll be standing before a window, let me finish, it will be a window filled with flowers, a flower for every century, more than twenty flowers, that's how we'll know that we're in the right place, and all the flowers will look like this one!

The princess swung herself onto her horse, no longer able to endure the clouds, for the stranger silently plotted out her and his first death. He sang her no word of farewell, and she rode towards her country with its blue hills that loomed in the distance in a terrible silence, for he had already driven the first thorn through her heart; and, ringed by her faithful attendants in the castle courtyard, she fell, bleeding, from her horse. But there was a smile on her feverish lips as she stammered: I know now, I know!

Conversation

1984

Jürg Laederach

1. The phone refuses to ring. I sit here on 82nd Street, no, on 83rd, no, on 81st; I forget where I am. The phone refuses to ring, to tear me out of this enforced solitude, which I know only too well. This solitude that makes me sick and stirs me to tears, but surely not tears of compassion. A call is bound to come any minute now up from The Village and afford me the company I desperately desire. The phone isn't ringing, the bell doesn't work.
2. I have no other recourse now but to resort to the sharpest provocation, as a consequence of which the phone always rings, because it cannot do otherwise: to strip myself naked, place the phone far out of reach and lay myself in the bathtub, full of bathwater, of course. It is a characteristic of mine that in undressing, I never get naked; I can undress myself as long as I like. On countless occasions I've tried, to strip myself, naked, that is, but it has never worked for me.
3. I spend more time getting undressed than most. Since I tend to toss my clothes in a heap supported by a chair (or in this case, since I only recently moved in, without a chair) my clothes pile up to a considerable height; it's quite a heap I have lying around. It is perfectly possible that beneath the clothes I just took off, several layers deeper, more clothes are being bred at this very minute; either my skin produces these clothes, or the new clothes grow between two layers of older, already worn clothing. In any case, I never get naked. One can only imagine what might happen were I ever to succeed.
4. Such are my bodily needs. Obviously, everything goes into my clothes, though I can't feel it, and it isn't noticeable to others. Just once in my life to see a little skin; for this I pray.
5. While most human beings crave to see another naked beside them, I harbour this same wish in regard to myself; but my energies are not up to the fulfillment of my wish. I know what I look like; had myself x-rayed, though not too deeply; the rays peeled off the excess layers, revealing no abnormality, which makes my condition all the more inexplicable.
6. I spend hours getting undressed; that's the truth. I made a pledge: every time an attempt to catch a glimpse of myself lies in the normal course of events of my day, I condone it with restrained enthusiasm, of course. I spend hours getting undressed, as a consequence of which I will have to spend as many hours getting dressed again. The traditional lowly clown's costume just made its appearance, stripped away, followed by the oil-smeared mechanic's cover-all, stripped away, followed by the cutaway, the tail-less tux, that is, which disintegrated as I stripped it off. The white pants of the poultry chef have just emerged, how busy the kitchen was today.
7. I'll have to spend hours, an entire night at least, getting dressed again as soon as the phone call comes. As soon as I climb into the bath, the water rises to the rim, and the cook that I am swells up like a soufflé, his clothing inflates.
8. This time the extended invocatory technique doesn't work. I lie in the tub, covered with soap, after climbing back and forth into and out of the tub for several hours now, each time removing another layer of clothing, till I dropped exhausted into the tub where I now lie beneath the jet of water, the water level rising perilously close to the edge, and my two knees, bedecked with leather patches, poking up out of the foam. And it's here at the knees of these leather-patched cook's pants soaring up out of the iridescent suds that I shiver with the cold.
9. I can't stand it much longer. Ever since I moved up here to 79th, no, to 76th Street – can't remember which – that is, ever since I started wondering why the phone never rang, I've changed completely, become so much more defenseless and susceptible. Perhaps I ought to get myself x-rayed again, things might have changed beneath the surface too. I'll let a little more water in.
10. The fundamental issue is clear. I am applying the sharpest means to provoke that phone call that refuses to come. I can't understand it: though millions of people are thinking of me at this very moment, that phone refuses to ring. Perhaps they don't dare call me. And whereas before it was the

most natural thing imaginable that though millions thought of me, they never actually called me, it is completely incomprehensible to me now that the phone should not ring, now that I've taken such pains to provoke it.

11. The millions of prospective callers fear that millions of others are ahead of them on line, that there's no getting through to me; thus the phone remains unused. There is another reason for this disuse: I have obviously not properly applied my conjuring technique. I didn't take it far enough. It is still too easy for me to climb out of the tub and, with dripping cook's pants, approach the telephone. And if a phone call should come and I'm standing there right in front of the phone, I can reach for the receiver immediately. Under such propitious circumstances no call will come through.
12. The telephone must first be placed further away from the tub. Were I to be able to get to it immediately when it rings, my reply to the prospective caller and the ensuing conversation would be assured. In which case, of course, no call would come through. Such conditions are not conducive to the satisfactory completion of a call, but rather, at best, to the telephone's empty ringing. I'm rather wet today, soaked through to several layers of clothing; not all the way to the skin though, I'm still dry below it all, my skin cannot get wet.
13. My own x-ray device reveals that the wetness has seeped all the way down to my forester's duds that fit me tightly several layers below. I may very well be the wettest person to ever lie in a tub. Water does not flow over me as it does over others, but rather, once it has settled around me, it seeps into my uppermost fabric and weighs me down. It is high time I climbed out of the tub, I tell myself, and I proceed to do so. Don't fall, I think to myself, and immediately trip over something: a spongy mass. A bad habit, this duplication of thought into action, better drop it.
14. I try to block out consciousness, for the disappointments are unending. Impossible to get used to it. I may in fact be the single individual most prone to duplicate my thinking via my actions. I think, and then I do what I think. I feel much better really when I'm not thinking, and consequently, not doing anything, since I am by nature immovable and can only be impelled into motion by a flood of redundant ideas. Now it's time to move, I think, and immediately replicate the thought in action. Out of the tub!
15. This is how I think, and this pre-phone call stage of my cognitive process propels my body out of the tub, my sub-exponentially variable body that is coated with a light film of suds and draped in cook's pants and shirt. Here between 73rd and 75th Street, but more likely at 80th Street, this body of mine can never take centre-stage, and is invariably hidden from the public eye, in the sight of which it remains forever wrapped in all these clothes. It should, however, be noted that the very person to whom it never shows itself, namely me, couldn't care less about it. With a contraction, the body wrapped in wet cook's clothes whips itself out of the tub as a preliminary to setting in place those additional hindrances blocking the bather from the telephone, such that – as soon as I can no longer reach the receiver – the call will definitely come through and tear me out of this hermetic communion with myself.
16. For its own dissimulation's sake, this body has laid too long in water. Once out of the water, its clothes hide it. The only way it can discover, that is, reveal itself to itself is by lunging at the receiver if a phone call comes. Then I can tell it all, confess everything which I now keep secret from myself. Only then, driven instinctively, can I find the words and ways to approach that which although close, remains infinitely far, wrapped in fabric, the tailored and ironed, albeit soaked, superfluous fabrics of my being.
17. Having strode, dripping, to the still-silent telephone on New York's Upper West Side, I pick up the telephone to a place even further out of reach. I drag its cord behind me. The cord grins back at me as I carry the receiver to the most distant corner of this curious New York apartment. The apartment has a horseshoe shape.
18. A majestically narrow horseshoe shape. Divided in three. It has a center and two wings. In the center stands the tub; I carry the phone towards one of the wings, the east wing. I drag that miserable device into the farthest corner of the east wing. The walls of the apartment are white. The sun is blinding. A call could come through now; it doesn't.
19. I deposit the phone in the farthest corner of the east wing of the apartment, walk back through the center, through the winter garden, back to the tub into which I allow myself to sink. A little worse for wear and tear perhaps on my outmost surface, my cook's surface. The tail-less tux, the cutaway lies on the chair beside me. I am calm again in my bathwater; its waves have stopped beating. I sit up and am wet. Wet and alone: this is my essential truth. New York refuses to call; that galls me, and not only that. It depresses me. Here I sit – don't recognize myself any more, I only know that tears of recognition will not fall; all my tears have run dry.

20. Seated back in the tub again, it's still too easy to get to the phone. My possible paths to it are likewise component parts of its scheme. In the short time we have matched wits, the telephone has perfected its perfidious methods. It saw right through my emergency measures. Never again will I permit a phone call to break through into my ever-congealing seclusion, my isolation, my solitude that dwells on nothing else but how to break out of itself; the telephone watches over all my possible paths, which, according to my calculations, are indeed too readily accessible.
21. Under these circumstances, no call can get through, no other New Yorker can reach me, no living soul to whom I might reveal, or rather, from whom it might be worth hiding my radical stance. The key to the satisfactory completion of this method of picking up the receiver (a method that has, after all, been in effect for half an eternity, several minutes, that is), lies, I firmly believe, in the time it takes to climb out of the tub. I can, if I have to, be slow about reaching the receiver, but quick, on the other hand, at leaving the tub. I have achieved record time as warm-water sprinter, and must, therefore, complicate the process.
22. I pour a bucket of suds over myself, grab a big brush and start scraping off the cook's layer of my being; the second cutaway surfaces, and I tear into it, launching into a lengthy cleaning process that can no longer be interrupted, except, of course, by a phone call. New York sullies its citizens to such an extent that only the most thorough mythologizing has any beneficial effect; and in any case, you're still stuck in New York; no one will uninvite you once you're here, this city is after all the Mecca of the most exotic masters of deceit. Still no phone call, even though I have succeeded, little by little, in tearing through the cutaway and I expect any minute now the appearance of my own skin.
23. The provocation of not being able to get to the receiver is still not extreme enough. I must bind myself to the tub, for which purpose underwater straps lie ready; the tongue of the belt can now be drawn through the shackle with my teeth. Perhaps not yet. Let the water get very hot first, so that, in climbing out, I may suffer a stroke. Later. The telephone is now positioned in the farthest corner of the horseshoe-shaped apartment; it's now a mere matter of forgetting whether in the west or the east wing. Forgetting this would double the time it takes to reach the phone, because I'd first have to look for it in both wings. If someone else lived with me in this scanty apartment I've rented, I would at least discuss the situation with him, decide just how secretively this whole business of moving the phone around would have to be carried out so that I couldn't possibly find it again. Then, dripping wet, fully clothed, I'd be forced to pace in a fury of frustration around the apartment, wringing my ears.
24. Meanwhile, I climbed out of the tub again and without knowing it, or perhaps forgetting right away what I was doing, I placed the phone in the room in the farthest corner of the east wing of the apartment, past the collapsing fruit crates – no, in that little alcove to the rear of the room with the empty fruit crates, the one that can only be reached via a small winding staircase, the door to which I keep locked. An unbreakable oak-panel door made of several-hundred-year-old New England oak stands between me and the phone that still refuses to ring. I toss the key to this impermeable door out the window. It falls into the big water tank at the district fire station, where the fire department maintains its reserve water supply. The very same structure that likewise houses that famous pole down which the firemen slide from their sleeping quarters to the station house proper, burning their hands in the process, bathing them thereafter in water from the tank. There, at any rate, in that water tank is where my key lies.
25. By turning on the hot water tap, I bring the water in my tub almost to a boil, the simmering suds dissolve the blue jeans that have come to the fore beneath my cutaway into little blue flakes; the suds dissolve everything. I appear to be naked but don't dare confirm this possibility with my fingers, for my skin is meanwhile shedding in strips from my flesh, and I see, for instance, the inner joints of my arms floating like hinges in the brew. I am, moreover, still fastened with heavy leather straps to the bottom of the tub. Unfortunately, however, my very upset appears to upset the balance, thereby deflecting the intervention of that 'extraneous' element of otherness I so desperately desire. The fact is, I have all the while been mumbling continuous and sometimes criss-crossing conversations with myself, conversations of varying contents, the overall effect of which, however, is to scare away calls. When someone is so continuously consumed with himself, others won't go near him.
26. The radio is turned up very loud, a crazy Brazilian reggae. The television is tuned to a midnight porno flick in which a woman, a naked woman – she has it good, I sigh, at least she can see her own skin – hung from a crane, is slowly lowered into molten gold and cranked up again, to the accompaniment of the Pink Panther theme played by Henry Mancini, and then the phone rings. A phone call at last, the magic formula worked, whew! What an effort! And it's probably a wrong number, and if I *could* reach the receiver I'd have to hang up again almost immediately. There is, after all, no sweeter pleasure while using the telephone than to lift the receiver a mere centimeter and

let it drop again immediately. This stimulates the caller to apply his utmost effort, a laudable challenge, he tries again, and again you pick up the receiver and let it fall, and whoever has been trying to reach you flies in a fury against the invisible bars of his cage like a bloodthirsty animal lusting after the flesh of its keeper. My boiling-hot bathwater stirs me, impelling me to conclude that it must be a wrong number. They hung up.

27. It's high time I took the situation in hand. Near-naked and rather alone, I ambled over past the falling fruit crates to the oak panel door and smashed it off its hinges with a single blow. So much for that. Now the telephone stands once again near the edge of the tub, the magic formula cannot be taken to the limit today, here between 75th and 79th Street (71st Street, more than likely) – only a mythomaniac could tell the difference, I see no difference; it's all the same to me.
28. I have kept the faucet from dripping; perhaps if I secretly listen in on the telephone line, I will catch a call before the would-be caller finishes dialling and the contraption starts ringing. If I repeatedly pick up the receiver, it is possible that I may provoke a call. All I have to do is precede the caller by several thousandths of a second. That would suffice to forestall the communication of an as yet uncommunicated thought with a complementary thought, likewise revealed. I whisper this into the mouthpiece, but even this relatively parsimonious provocation has no effect. The whole business is shamanistically hexed today, even though the entire telephone system ought to weep with pity for the wet man lying here, scraping off his last covering with a heavy horse brush. No more calls today, the bath can be gradually concluded.
29. I tie up my legs with the towel. Can't move. Couldn't possibly take a step towards the telephone. No way to reach for the receiver. Still nothing doing.
30. Silence. I glue down the receiver with a permanent fixative. No way to pick it up any more. Reach for the receiver now and you reach for the entire telephone. Let it lie there and the phone will ring, lift it and the phone will go on ringing; there's no way to separate the receiver, no way to make contact, neither amid the collapsing fruit crates, in the crash of the oak panel door, nor down below in the fire department's water tank. And even this unstoppable ringing, which with ruthless disregard and cataclysmic force has shattered the silence surrounding my sometimes muttered conversation with myself – even this ringing is a communication, a message that says someone wants you, someone among the multitude wants to speak to you. What they want is virtually you, and what they want to do is to sort of speak with you: that's why they're calling an approximation of you: please, they are pleading, as it were, won't you sort of pick up the receiver. It's done now. The extreme consequence of my failure to make contact has been realized. This I mutter to myself while slipping back into the cook's pants which I had previously tossed over the back of the chair. Drain the tub now. Rinse it clean. No call will come through today, I know, and my apartment is slowly bathed in the loneliness of fading light.

The Tales and their Authors

‘My Gmunden’ (‘Mein Gmunden’), by Peter Altenberg, was first collected in the author’s last volume of short prose sketches published in his lifetime, *Mein Lebensabend* (*The Evening of My Life*), in 1919.

Peter Altenberg, aka Richard Engländer (1859–1919), drew inspiration for his trademark short prose from the concise aesthetic of Charles Baudelaire’s prose poems and the spatial limitations of the ‘Correspondenzkarte’, the postcard, first launched and disseminated in his native Austria in 1869. Born into a prosperous middle-class Jewish Viennese merchant family, he took advantage of a psychiatric diagnosis of ‘over-excitation of the nervous system’ and ‘incapacity for employment’ to fly the coop and embrace the bohemian hand-to-mouth life of the Coffee-House poet, of which he became the very epitome. For many years he lived in cheap hotels, checked in for several stays at insane asylums and gave the Café Central as his permanent address. Discovered and fêted by the critic Karl Kraus, Altenberg was at one point nominated for a Nobel Prize; and some years after his death was largely forgotten.

‘The Secrets of the Princess of Kagran’ (‘Die Geheimnisse der Prinzessin von Kagran’), by Ingeborg Bachmann, is excerpted from her novel *Malina*, published in 1971.

Born in Klagenfurt, Austria, **Ingeborg Bachmann** (1926–73) worked for some years for the Allied radio station Rot-Weiss-Rot, for which she wrote her first radio dramas. Best known for her poetry, she became a member of the celebrated post-war literary circle Gruppe-47, whose members included the novelists Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass and the literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki. But it was another post-war literary giant, the poet Paul Celan, with whom she had a brief, torrid love affair and a long, tormented friendship, who really got under her skin. ‘The Secrets of the Princess of Kagran’, written following Celan’s suicide, and ten years after they’d broken off all contact, is a barely veiled poetic tribute to him as the saviour unable or unwilling to save himself.

‘The Dandelion’ (‘Die Hundeblume’), by Wolfgang Borchert, was posthumously published in a volume of selected stories of the same name in 1947.

Wolfgang Borchert (1921–47), whose searing poems, short stories, plays and anti-war manifesto made him a major proponent of what has come to be called *Trümmerliteratur* (rubble literature), hardly lived long enough to leave footprints on posterity. Born in Hamburg, he fled his apprenticeship to a book dealer to study drama and joined a travelling theatre group. But military service in the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front in the Second World War provided more drama than he could bear. Writing home about the horrors he’d witnessed and the miserable conditions, he was arrested by the Gestapo and charged with treasonous statements. A death sentence was commuted to eight months in prison, whereupon he was returned to the Front. Thereafter, one day returning from sentry duty with the middle finger of his left hand missing, he was accused of self-mutilation to evade military service and once again arrested, this time being placed in solitary confinement, after which he was yet again returned to the Front. Frostbite and hepatitis reduced him to a bag of bones with a bitter conscience and a will to live. Later captured by the French, he escaped and walked all the way home to Hamburg. In the little time left he wrote poetry, short fiction and drama that scorch the page and sizzle on stage. He died in 1947 in a hepatic sanatorium in Basel, after drafting his anti-war manifesto *Dann gibt es nur eins!* (*Then We Have Only One Choice!*).

‘Shadowlight’ (‘Gegenlicht’), by Paul Celan, first appeared in the journal *Die Tat* (Zürich), 12 March 1949, and was subsequently included in his book *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (*Poppy and Memory*), 1952.

Born in Czernowitz, in the Bukovina, formerly the easternmost German-speaking outpost of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Chernivtsi, Ukraine, Paul Antschel, aka **Paul Celan** (1920–70), is considered by many to be the pre-eminent German-language poet of the twentieth century. His Jewish ancestry, the fact that his family perished in the Holocaust, and his own experience of Nazi slave labour camps makes his relationship to the German language and the German literary tradition all the more complex, as if he were enraptured by and entangled in the web of the very verbs that betrayed him. In 1948 Celan moved to Paris, where he worked as a translator and a lecturer in German at the elite École normale supérieure. Recipient of the Bremen Literature Prize in 1958 and the prestigious Georg Büchner Prize, he flung himself into the Seine and drowned on 20 April

1970.

‘Peter Schlemiel’ (‘Peter Schlemihls Wundersame Geschichte’), written in 1813 and first published in 1814, became an international sensation. John Bowring’s English translation of 1824, with illustrations by George Cruikshank, was one of the inspirations for J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. The tale influenced the disparate likes of Hans Christian Andersen, Oscar Wilde, Jacques Offenbach and Karl Marx, and was one of the late Italo Calvino’s great favourites. The title is inspired by the Yiddish word *schlemiel*, meaning a hopeless incompetent. A displaced French aristocrat of Catholic background and a lifelong outsider, Chamisso socialized and identified with Jewish friends in Berlin.

Born in Ante, in Champagne, France, Louis Charles Adélaïde de Chamisso, aka **Adelbert von Chamisso** (1781–1838), fled the French Reign of Terror to Berlin, where he spent most of his adult life and found his literary voice in German. A popular poet, his verse was later set to music by Robert Schumann. Also a world traveller and noted botanist, Chamisso joined (and subsequently wrote up in *Reise um die Welt* [*Description of a Voyage Round the World*]) a Russian-led scientific expedition, during which he described and named a number of species, including the California poppy, which he named *Eschscholzia californica*, in honour of the ship’s doctor, Johann Friedrich von Eschscholtz. The latter returned the favour by describing and dubbing the California sun-cup or sun-drop *Camissonia* in his honour. In a letter to Madame de Staël he espoused his life stance: ‘I am a Frenchman in Germany and a German in France; a Catholic among the Protestants, Protestant among the Catholics; a philosopher among the religious […], a mundane among the savants, and a pedant to the mundane; Jacobin among the aristocrats, and to the democrats a nobleman […] Nowhere am I at home […]!’

‘The Marble Statue’ (‘Das Marmorbild’), by Josef von Eichendorff, was written in 1818 and first published in the literary journal *Frauentaschenbuch für das Jahr 1819* (*Women’s Handbook for the Year 1819*), edited by the author Friedrich de la Motte-Fouqué.

Josef Karl Benedikt Freiherr von Eichendorff, aka Josef von Eichendorff (1788–1857), was born into a Prussian Catholic aristocratic line on the family estate Schloß Lubowitz, in Upper Silesia. His verse having inspired innumerable musical settings, von Eichendorff vies with Heinrich Heine as the most melodized German bard. He is also well known for his prose, notably the novel *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* (*Life of a Good-for-Nothing*), generally considered a classic of German Romanticism, and several fantastic novellas. After fighting against the French occupation forces in the Napoleonic Wars, von Eichendorff held various positions in the Prussian state administration before withdrawing from public life. In later years he translated several of Calderón’s religious dramas from the Spanish and authored a history of German literature.

‘The Singing Bone’, ‘Hansel and Gretel’ and ‘The Children of Hameln’, collected and retold by the Brothers Grimm, were included in the first two volumes of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children’s and Household Fairy Tales*), published in 1812 and 1814 respectively.

The **Brothers Grimm**, **Jakob** (1785–1863) and **Wilhelm** (1786–1859), were born in Hanau, into a family of nine children, six of whom survived. Students of law and linguistics, they worked both independently and together. Best known for their fairy tale collection, they also collaborated on the first German dictionary and a book of German legends. In addition Jakob wrote important books on German grammar, the law and German mythology. Following the demise of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, Germany comprised a loose confederation of city states occupied at the time by Napoleon’s forces. If Germans can be said to have a common character, the Grimms surely had a hand in defining it. The fairy tales they collected, and touched up in their retelling, sounded the depths of the German unconscious. The popularity of their collection, which went through seven editions in the Brothers’ lifetimes, makes it second only to Luther’s translation of the Bible as a formative influence on, and mirror of, the German identity.

‘Descent into the Mines’, by Heinrich Heine, is excerpted from *Die Harzreise* (*The Harz Journey*), an almost immediate bestseller upon its appearance in 1826. It was subsequently included in the first section of his *Reisebilder* (*Travel Pictures*), a compilation of three travelogues, interspersed with verse, that made the author famous.

The verse of **Heinrich Heine** (1791–1856) inspired more *Lieder* than that of any other German poet. His no less notable prose forged a new literary form, equal parts poetic, politic and prophetic. His alternately tongue-in-cheek, alternately lyrical, alternately ironic narrative style elicited Freud’s psycholinguistic analysis in *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*. Born into an assimilated Jewish merchant family in Düsseldorf, under French domination at the time, Heine studied law, which he never practised, converted to Protestantism, in which he never believed, and fled Germany, a place he equally loved and loathed, for France, where he never felt quite at home. Scraping together a meagre living from his verse and journalism, he spent the last twenty years of his life in what he called his ‘mattress grave’, physically paralysed, in Paris.

‘The Lunatic’ (‘Der Irre’), by Georg Heym, was posthumously published in 1913 in the short story collection *Der Dieb* (*The Thief*).

Born in Hirschberg, in Lower Silesia, Georg Theodor Franz Artur Heym, aka **Georg Heym** (1887–1912), moved with his family to Berlin. Like so many other German writers, Heym studied law, a profession he only reluctantly and intermittently practised. At meetings of the so-called ‘Neopathetisches Cabaret’ (Neopathetic Cabaret) Heym first gave readings of his plays and poetry. In 1911 he published a book of verse, *Der ewige Tag* (*The Eternal Day*), the only work to appear in his brief lifetime. In 1912 he and a friend went skating on the frozen River Havel, fell through a crack and drowned.

‘The Sandman’ (‘Der Sandmann’), by E. T. A. Hoffmann, first appeared in his book *Nachtstücke* (*Night Pieces*), Vol. 1 (1816–17). Framed as a cautionary tale, this eye-popping, hallucinatory account of visionary insight disintegrating into madness inspired generations of writers. It also provided rich food for thought for Sigmund Freud in his essay ‘The Uncanny’ and tantalized the surrealists.

Civil servant, composer, conductor, theatre director and music critic of note, Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann, aka **E. T. A. Hoffmann** (1776–1822), born in Königsberg, Prussia, changed his middle name to Amadeus in homage to Mozart, whose music he revered. But it was with his wild, whimsical tales, sometimes penned at lightning speed, that he made his living and his mark. A thin little man with deep-set eyes, sharp features and porcupine-like hair, as if he were a character of his own creation, with temperament enough for multiple personalities, his face appears to have been as mobile and versatile as his pen, even after his body succumbed to the paralysis of syphilis.

‘In the Penal Colony’ (‘In der Strafkolonie’), by Franz Kafka, was originally written in 1914 and was published in 1919 as the fourth of a series of Drugulin Editions of short works issued by the Verlag Kurt Wolff. In response to his publisher Kurt Wolff’s shock and concern about the violence of the tale, Kafka replied in a letter dated 10 November 1916: ‘Your objections to the distressing aspects accord completely with my own opinion, though I feel that way about almost everything I have written so far … by way of clarifying the latest story, however, let me merely add that it is not alone in being distressing, but that our times in general, and my own time in particular, have been and continue to be equally distressing.’ Among the contemporary critical responses, only one, by Kurt Tucholsky, sounded its murky depths, declaring it to be ‘a work of art so great that it defies all labels […] The book may not even be of our time,’ whereupon Tucholsky adds with an implied wink: ‘It is completely harmless. As harmless as Kleist.’

The adjective ‘Kafkaesque’ says it all. Notwithstanding his relatively small body of published work, comprising three novels, one of which was left unfinished, stories and short prose fragments, **Franz Kafka** (1883–1924) entered the collective unconscious as few other writers have. Born in Prague into an assimilated Jewish family, he was a lawyer by trade, engaged in investigating the personal injury claims of industrial workers for the Worker’s Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia, who carved out precious time at night to write. Ironically, a diagnosis of tuberculosis proved both a ticket to freedom, permitting him to quit his job and devote himself entirely to writing, and a death sentence. Posterity must be eternally grateful to his friend and literary executor, Max Brod, who ignored his request to burn everything.

‘The Island of Eternal Life’ (‘Die Insel der Tausendjährigen Menschen’), by Georg Kaiser, was written in 1943.

Friedrich Carl Georg Kaiser, aka **Georg Kaiser** (1878–1945), was born in Magdeburg and made his name in Berlin as one of the most performed playwrights of the Weimar Republic. Best known for the Expressionist style of his early plays, his style influenced Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Toller. In later plays, Kaiser shifted to a more naturalist manner characterized as *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new sobriety). He also collaborated with the composer Kurt Weill on several one-act operas. Following Hitler’s rise to power, Kaiser fled to Switzerland, where he continued to write until his death in 1945.

‘The Tattooed Portrait’ (‘Das Tätowierte Porträt’), by Egon Erwin Kisch, was originally part of a memoir written in German, but contracted for publication in 1936 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. in New York, under the English title *Crawling in an Inky River*. Knopf subsequently reneged on the contract when the changing political climate in the US made the publication of a book by an exiled German writer of leftist leanings inadvisable. Redubbed *Sensation Fair*, the book was brought out by Modern Age Books in New York in 1941. The original German version subsequently appeared in 1942 under the title *Marktplatz der Sensationen*, published by the German exile press El Libro Libre, in Mexico City, and was reissued in 1967 by the Aufbau Verlag in Berlin. The German story ran again in the anthology *Café Klößchen, 38 Grotesken*, edited by Joachim Schreck, published by the Eulenspiegel Verlag in Berlin in 1980.

Known as ‘Der Rasende Reporter’ (the reporter on the run), **Egon Erwin Kisch** (1885–1948) was a prolific journalist of decidedly literary inclinations. Born in Prague, of Jewish parentage, he lived through the First

World War, in which he was wounded, the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, the proclamation of the Austrian Republic and the Weimar Republic, the rise of the Third Reich, the Second World War, exile and extensive travel, all of which he documented in countless accounts written for newspapers and thereafter compiled in some thirty-five books. 'There is nothing more sensational in this world,' wrote Kisch, summing up his credo, 'than the time in which we live.'

'A Raw Recruit' ('Gestellung'), by Klabund, was written in 1915, and published in *Der Kunterbuntergang des Abendlandes* (*The Higgledy-Piggledy Path of Western Civilization*), 1922.

Poet, songwriter, satirist, novelist and playwright, **Klabund**, aka Alfred Henschke (1890–1928), was born in Krossen, and grew up in Frankfurt (Oder), the hometown of Heinrich von Kleist. A student of philosophy, philology and drama, he derived his pen-name from a combination of *Klabautermann* (a mischievous imp in North German folklore) and *Vagabund* (vagabond). Weakened lungs from tuberculosis made him unfit for military service. Though, like many of his young patriotic contemporaries, he initially welcomed the First World War, he soon changed his tune, and was charged with treason following his publication of a letter calling for the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The irreverence of his cabaret ditties made him a counter-cultural favourite of the Weimar Republic and a bête noire of the Nazis.

'St Cecilia or the Power of Music' ('Die heilige Cäcilie oder die Gewalt der Musik'), by Heinrich von Kleist, first ran in several consecutive issues of Kleist's own newspaper the *Berliner Abendblätter* (*Berlin Evening News*) before it folded.

Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811), born in Frankfurt (Oder), in Prussia, was an aristocrat by birth, a rebel by inclination, a Romantic by temperament and one of German literature's greatest stylists. His plays are now considered classics, and his chiselled prose was a model for the likes of Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka. A reluctant soldier turned reticent bureaucrat, he tried and failed, first as a magazine editor, then as a newspaper publisher. 'I do not wish to be happy,' Kleist wrote in a letter to his half-sister Ulrike, 'I want to plummet the lowest level of hell.' He succeeded in his dubious wish. His writing brought him meagre renown. First hailed, then scorned by his contemporaries, Kleist put the final period on the sentence of his short life with a bullet through the head.

'Conversation', by Jürg Laederach, was originally published in the author's collection *Laederachs 69 Arten den Blues zu spielen* (*Laederach's 69 Ways to Play the Blues*), 1984.

Jürg Laederach (1945–) was born in Basel, Switzerland. His numerous publications include novels, short story collections, plays and translations.

'A Conversation Concerning Legs' ('Gespräch über Beine'), by Alfred Lichtenstein, originally appeared in the journal *Aktion* in 1915 and was posthumously published in the author's book *Geschichten* (1919).

The life of **Alfred Lichtenstein** (1889–1914) lasted all of twenty-five years, cut short by a hostile bullet in the trenches of Vermandovillers on the Somme in the early days of the First World War. Born in Berlin, he studied law, later switching to theatre, before being drafted. One of the lightning rods of the German avant-garde, he published dark poems and eccentric stories in the leading Expressionist journals, *Der Sturm*, *Simplicissimus* and *Die Aktion*. His alter ego, Kuno Kohn, summed up the author's credo in the story 'Café Klößchen': 'The only solace is to be sad. If sadness slips into despair, better to be grotesque. Live on for a laugh. And try to find a modicum of relief in the fact that existence is little more than a string of brutal, shabby pranks.'

'The Blackbird' ('Die Amsel'), by Robert Musil, originally appeared in the volume *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (*Nachlaß zu Lebzeiten*), published in 1935 in Zurich, where the author and his wife lived in exile from their native Austria, soon to be annexed by the Third Reich. A compilation of reflections and tales he disparagingly referred to as his 'little stop-gap book', it was issued to help keep his head above water while he laboured on his never-to-be-completed magnum opus, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*).

The son of an academic engineer, **Robert Musil** (1880–1942) was born in the Austrian provincial capital of Klagenfurt, schooled at a military academy, and trained as a mathematician, behavioural psychologist, engineer and philosopher. He digested and channelled these diverse disciplines into his incomparably well-crafted fiction, essays and plays. While his first book, *Die Verwirrungen des Zögling Törless* (*Young Törless*), was a critical and commercial success, subsequent work, fiction and plays earned him respectable reviews, and the prestigious Kleist Prize, but hardly enough money to scrape by. He wrote occasional theatre criticism to try to make ends meet, though the ends never met.

'The Magic Egg' ('Das Wunder-Ei'), by Mynona, was written in 1916 and first collected in *Schwarz-Weiss-Rot. Grotesken* (1919). 'A New Kind of Plaything' ('Neues Kinderspielzeug') was first collected in *Rosa die Schöne*

Schutzmannsfrau und Andere Grotesken (*Rosa, The Constable's Comely Wife, and other Grotesques*) (1913).

Mynona, aka Salomo Friedlaender (1871–1946), was a perfectly functioning split personality: a serious philosopher by day (author of *Friedrich Nietzsche. Eine Intellektuelle Biographie* [*Friedrich Nietzsche: An Intellectual Biography*], *Kant für Kinder* [*Kant for Children*] and his magnum opus, a study of Schopenhauer, titled *Schöpferische Indifferenz* [*Creative Indifference*]) and a literary absurdist by night who took the pen-name Mynona (*Anonym*, the German word for anonymous, spelt backwards) to publish black-humoured tales he called *Grotesken*, or grotesques. Born in the Prussian province of Posen, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Poznan, in Poland, the son of a Jewish physician, Salomo Friedlaender flitted between various activities, including insurance underwriting and the study of medicine, before settling on philosophy as his primary pursuit. Moving to Berlin, he soon found an outlet for his whimsical side, writing and delivering his grotesques at various Expressionist-inspired and Dadaist-leaning cafés. The grotesques were collected during his lifetime in some twenty books. In 1933 he and his wife emigrated to Paris, where he managed to elude the Gestapo – his wife was not so lucky – and where he died in poor health and dire poverty in 1946.

'The Seamstress' ('Die Näherin'), by Rainer Maria Rilke, one of his early stories, was first published in 1894.

Born in Prague, Bohemia, then an eastern dominion of the German-speaking Austro-Hungarian Empire, René Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke, aka **Rainer Maria Rilke** (1875–1926), is best known for his poetic works, notably his cycles, the prose poems *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*) and verse series *Sonette an Orpheus* (*Sonnets to Orpheus*). But his fiction, notably his semi-autobiographical novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*), a modernist masterpiece that paved the way for the likes of Robert Musil, is no less remarkable in form and content. The inspiration for the novel was the time Rilke spent in Paris as the secretary to sculptor Auguste Rodin, whom he revered. Rodin later fired Rilke for taking the liberty of engaging in personal exchanges with Rodin's correspondents. A lifelong nomad, Rilke roamed around Europe and spent a formative time at the Château de Muzot in the commune of Veyras, in Switzerland, where he completed the aforementioned poetic cycles.

'The Onion' ('Die Zwiebel'), by Kurt Schwitters, was first published in the German literary review *Der Sturm* in 1919. An anti-*Märchen* conceived as a textual collage of assorted shreds of advertisements, truisms and diatribes, it portrays the artist as sacrificial lamb who gets his own in the end by reassembling his severed parts.

Born in Hanover, painter, sculptor, designer, composer and poet **Kurt Schwitters** (1887–1948) was best known for his collages in image, word and tone. A true 'realist' of the twentieth century, he presented the fragmented reality of culture's collapse. Condemned by the Nazis as an *entarteter* (degenerate) artist, Schwitters fled first to Norway and then to England, where he was briefly interned on the Isle of Man as an enemy alien and earned a meagre living through portrait-painting. 'I sympathize with nonsense,' he once said. Or as he put it in a letter: 'We play till death takes us away.'

'Rune Mountain' ('Der Runenberg'), by Ludwig Tieck, first appeared in the *Taschenbuch für Kunst und Laune Pocket Compendium for Art and Spirit*), 1804, and was, thereafter, included in the volume *Phantasus* (1812), a collection of Tieck's fantastic tales.

Born in Berlin, the poet, translator, critic, editor and author of novellas Johann Ludwig Tieck, aka **Ludwig Tieck** (1773–1853), was one of the leading proponents of German Romanticism. In addition to his own compositions, he is known for his translation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, as well as plays by William Shakespeare for an edition begun by August Wilhelm von Schlegel that subsequently became a standard of German literature. He also edited a posthumous edition of the work of Heinrich von Kleist.

'The Time Saver' ('Der Zeitsparer'), by Ignaz Wrobel, aka Kurt Tucholsky, originally appeared in the author's second book, *Der Zeitsparer. Grotesken*, in 1914.

Journalist, satirist, poet, sceptic, critic, the native-born Berliner **Kurt Tucholsky** (1890–1935) was as much the voice of 1920s Berlin as artist Georg Grosz was its eyes. Like his literary forebear and role model, the poet Heinrich Heine, Tucholsky was a reluctant lawyer by training and a Jewish convert to Christianity by expedience, who never practised either. A master of the short prose form called *Feuilleton*, Tucholsky dished out his acerbic wit under various pseudonyms (Ignaz Wrobel, Theobald Tiger, Peter Panter, Kasper Hauser, et al.), enlivening the pages of the left-liberal *Berliner Tagesblatt*, the weekly *Die Weltbühne* and other papers, until the Nazis appeared on the scene and laughter went out of fashion. Tucholsky fled to Sweden, and, in despair at the inability of words to combat the evil in his native land, took his own life. One of the last entries in his journal reads: 'If I were to die now, I'd say to myself: "Was that all?" And: "I didn't really get the point of it." And: "It was a little loud." '

'The Kiss' ('Der Kuß I'), by Robert Walser, first appeared in the journal *Deutsche Monatshefte* in April 1913.

Robert Walser (1878–1956), one of the most enigmatic and elusive writers of the German language, was born in Biel, Switzerland, into a family with many children and a history of mental illness, to which his mother, two brothers and he himself finally succumbed. Never having completed his formal education, he worked at various low-level positions, including junior clerk, and trained to become a butler, writing all the while. Admired by Robert Musil, Kurt Tucholsky, Hermann Hesse and Franz Kafka, among others, Walser moved to Berlin, where he scraped together a modest living and enjoyed a brief period of limited acclaim for his novels and the short stories and whimsical reflections he regularly published in newspapers. Returning to Switzerland, he continued to write, especially reflections inspired by long solitary walks. A loner by temperament, Walser grew increasingly weary of worldly ways, and in 1929, suffering from acute anxiety, followed by a nervous breakdown, entered the mental home of Waldau, whence he was later moved, against his will, to the sanatorium at Herisau, where he died of a heart attack during a stroll in the snow. The man and his remarkable prose might best be characterized by his own description of a character in his novel *Jakob von Gunten*: 'He speaks like a bungled somersault and behaves like a big, bunched-up impossibility in human form.' Or as Elias Canetti once wrote of him: 'His writing is a tireless attempt to conceal fear.'

'The Experiment or the Victory of the Children' ('Das Experiment oder der Sieg der Kinder'), by Unica Zürn, was among the stories she wrote from 1949 to 1955 for various Berlin newspapers.

Writer, novelist, poet, painter, draughtswoman, Nora Berta Unica Ruth Zürn, aka **Unica Zürn** (1916–70), lived a lifelong flirtation with madness that finally ended with a leap out of the window of a Paris apartment. Born in Berlin, she worked as a secretary and later as an advertising scenarist for UFA, the German film studio, before leaving regular employment behind to scrape together a meagre living writing short prose for newspapers and radio plays. Marrying the German surrealist artist Hans Bellmer, the two moved to Paris, where they frequented surrealist salons. Zürn began to paint and draw and exhibited her work. She also wrote anagrams. At one point she contemplated abandoning writing and devoting herself entirely to visual art. A stormy marriage was interspersed with several stays at sanatoria. At the time of his death, Rainer Werner Fassbinder was working on a movie based on her autobiographical short novel *Dunkler Frühling* (*Dark Spring*).

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The Acknowledgements on pp. 359–361 constitute an extension of this page

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* Daniel Niklaus Chodowiecki (1726–1801), Polish-German painter and printmaker.

† Count Alessandro di Cagliostro, aka Giuseppe Balsamo (1743–95), Italian occultist, forger and adventurer.

* Excerpted from ‘The Harz Journey’ in *Travel Pictures*.

* aka Salomo Friedlaender.

† Reference to Else Lasker-Schüler (1869–1945), a German-Jewish poet famous for her bohemian lifestyle.

* aka Salomo Friedlaender.

* aka Alfred Henschke.

* aka Kurt Tucholsky.

* Literally ‘one-year volunteer’.

† Literally ‘topmost button of a pair of underpants’.

* The literal translation of the title does not do it justice. *Hundeblume* in the German, literally ‘dog flower’, is indeed a dandelion, but the English lacks the blossom’s bark.

* Here, again, the translator is at a loss. The German wild flower *Löwenzahn*, another name for *Hundeblume*, literally ‘lion’s tooth’, packs a barbarous bite that the English ‘dandelion’ can only meekly mimic.

* Reference to the play *Der Zerbrochene Krug* (*The Broken Jug*), by Heinrich von Kleist.